THE *Western* NOVEL CLASSIC

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ED MOORE

BLACK GOLD STAMPEDE

A Full Length Western Novel

ABOUT THIS WESTERN NOVEL CLASSIC

BLACK GOLD STAMPEDE

By ED MOORE When oil was discovered near Black Rock, oil men and ranchers got ready for a battle to the finish.

Lee Trawick came to Black Rock just before Stuart Cameron, Eastern oil promoter, brought in a well. Lee made an error and found himself in the employ of Cameron, but his sympathies in the fight that was looming ahead were on the side of the ranchers, whose range would be ruined by the flood of black gold.

When Lee learned that the biggest oil fields lay beneath Clearwater Basin, Jeff Mitchell's range, and that Cameron's aim was to get control of it, he joined Mitchell in a frantic effort to sink his own wells and haul his own oil before Cameron could beat him.

A conflict between Jean Mitchell and Linda, a gambler's daughter, complicated Lee's problem; and Lee's own half brother hired his gun to Cameron to fight Lee. Before the struggle was over Black Rock was a smoking ruin; but the quarrel between oil man and cattleman was settled, and Lee could return to the range that he loved.

Here is an ace action story which moves at high speed and vividly dramatizes one of the great conflicts in the building of the West.

For the best in Western fiction,
read Western Novel Classics

BLACK GOLD STAMPEDE

by Ed Moore

Novel Selections Inc. New York

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This Western Novel Classic represents an abridgement of the original to speed the action.

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CHAPTER I

LEE TRAWICK hadn't been in Black Rock ten minutes before the ruthlessness of the town reached out and touched him. He had just stabled his horse—at the boom-town price of two dollars a day—and was drifting along the crowded boardwalk when a jeering crowd before a store in the middle of town attracted his atenttion.

Because he was trying to sift the temper of the town and because he was wondering why he disliked and distrusted it so thoroughly Lee swung off the boardwalk and crossed the street to join the crowd. His eyes swept the length of the street and he was amazed at the change a few weeks had brought to Black Rock. Since he had heard of what was taking place he had expected some activity but was completely unprepared for the scale on which things were being done.

For ten years since the Dover Mine had folded Black Rock had been a brooding ghost town. Then almost overnight the town had been reborn. Salons, cafés, stores and business offices lined the street in a way that suggested Black Rock was to reach a pre-eminence now that would dwarf its former prestige as a boom town.

But there was a difference here, an alien influence that had little in common with any other Western town which had sprung into being at the instance of a gold strike. Lee Trawick had felt it immediately upon riding into town. That difference was symbolized by the gaunt derrick which thrust upward a hundred feet just outside the circle of buildings. That derrick cast an alien shadow over the town, and the harsh slap of a donkey engine was a jarring note out of harmony with the noise of the crowds.

Lee pushed into the crowd of half a hundred men which had attracted his attention, and there, too, the alien note was significant. The miners in the crowd were familiar enough, though there was bitterness and disappointment etched in every line of their faces. Lee could understand that. News of a new strike at Black Rock had spread with the speed of a prairie fire and had brought prospectors and miners thronging to the town in droves.

But the miners had found no ground to stake, no ground they wanted to stake. They had found only the gaunt skeleton of the derrick, and it had no meaning for them. They had hung around, waiting for they knew not what, feeling cheated and resentful that a strike might mean something other than gold.

And Lee saw that fully half the crowd was composed of men who were strange to the West. Big broad-shouldered, deep-chested men who wore rough work clothes and cumbersome shoes and spoke in a foreign language or broken, scarcely intelligible English.

Lee pushed to the front of the crowd. A long-bearded old miner stood on the steps of a vacant store building facing two men. Lee sized the two up at a glance: gunmen, hard cases, they were in any language or any circumstance. The old-timer was shaking with rage and desperation.

"Ain't no use to get worked up, Crazy Luke," one of the gunmen said lazily. "I could just throw you out of this building. Instead, I'm offerin' you a hundred dollars to move out."

"*You're* offerin' it!" Crazy Luke cried. "You go back and tell Stuart Cameron he can go to hell. For ten years I've lived in this town all by myself. I always knowed it would come back. And it is comin' back, though God knows not the way I wanted. But it's comin'. I didn't mind when men grabbed all the vacant buildings and Cameron hogged most of 'em, but I've lived in this store for ten years. It's mine and I ain't getin' out!"

"Is that a fact now?" the gunman said cruelly. "Buildings in town are needed for somethin' more than a crazy desert rat to live in. You ain't in business. What makes you think you can hold a building like this just to live in?"

"On account of it's mine. Cameron ain't got no right to it."

"I reckon he has. It's him that's bringin' this town back to life. And he needs another building."

Stuart Cameron as an individual meant nothing to Lee, but he knew the signs. On his way from the livery stable he had seen several separate plate-glass windows with bright gold lettering on them: Panhandle Petroleum Company, Stuart Cameron, President; Cameron Investment Company; Cameron and Company; Cameron Development Company. There were doubtless other signs attesting the prominence and power of a man whose ambition left no room for an old prospector with a faith that had survived ten weary years of loneliness.

Lee knew the injustice of what was taking place was no business of his and he had no right to intervene—just as he had a vague feeling that he was going to *have* to intervene.

"All right, Grandpa," the gunman snapped, his patience gone. "Are you takin' this hundred dollars?"

"I ain't sellin' and I ain't movin'," Crazy Luke said stubbornly.

"You're movin' but you're right about not sellin'. That chance is gone. Now get the hell off them steps and move on.'

"But this is my home, all the home I got," Crazy Luke cried desperately. "Don't that mean nothin' to you?"

"Not a damn thing," the gunman said brutally. "Let's chunk him off, Slinger."

The other gunman stepped forward and they reached for the terrified old man who was trying to scramble toward the door. They had their

hands on him when Lee's quiet voice broke through the heavy silence.

"Let him alone," Lee said.

The gunmen whirled with catlike quickness. The crowd shifted and backed up. The man called Slinger waited, giving the lead to his companion. The gunman moved away from Luke and his eyes bit into Lee's.

"Just who the hell are you?" he snapped.

"Nobody you'd know," Lee said. "It just sounds to me like the old-timer has got a right to that building. Let him alone."

"Mister," the guman said sarcastically, "I didn't know I was takin' orders from you. Excuse me."

"That's all right," Lee said and smiled slightly.

The smile snapped the gunman's restraint and in an instant he was in a vicious temper. "I'm throwin' this old codger out of here," he said savagely. "You want to making somethin' out of it?"

"I am making something out of it," Lee said gently.

Just for a few seconds the gunman paused, while the exhaust of the donkey engine grew louder in the hush. Then the man snapped his hand toward his gun; his fingers splayed out losely in the sure sign of a deadly gunman. His weapon was clear when Lee struck. He didn't kill the gunman. It would have been better later if he had. But then his draw beat the gun hawk's so far there was no necessity for killing him. Lee whipped his arm up and slashed the barrel of his gun against the side of the man's head. He was just beginning to crumple when Lee spun toward Slinger who had started to draw. Slinger's hand came away from his gun as though it were too hot to handle.

"You're not wanting any?" Lee asked mildly.

"Not me," Slinger said. "It wasn't my fight in the first place. I just came along to see the show."

"The show's over," Lee snapped. "That goes for all of you." He wheeled on the crowd. It shifted restlessly, then broke up and drifted.

Slinger started away but Lee stopped him. "You're forgetting something," he said, indicating the crumpled gunman. "Take him back where he came from, to this Cameron, I reckon."

"He don't belong to me." Slinger shrugged. "I don't even work for Cameron."

"Take him anyway."

Slinger's eyes lit with wicked humor. He said, "All right, mister, I'll take him. I'll take him straight to Cameron. If I was you I wouldn't stick around long after that."

He swung the unconscious man over his shoulder and stepped out into the street. The tightness went out of Lee's nerves then, and he rolled a smoke. Crazy Luke came down off the porch, pathetic in his gratitude.

"That's all right, Luke," Lee said. "But how about next time?"

"They won't catch me in the open again." Luke swore. "Mostly I'll stay inside with a scatter-gun."

Lee nodded and Luke looked at him curiously. "You ain't one of the oil crowd or you wouldn't have bucked a Cameron man. I'm sorry it was on my account, son. There's trouble for the man Cameron sets out to get."

"I'll take my chances," Lee said. "I don't know Cameron. I was headed this way and didn't hear about the boom until two days ago. I came on, hoping it wouldn't be big enough to last."

"There's them as says it's gonna be the biggest thing ever hit the West," Luke ruminated. "Me, I don't know nothin' about this oil, ain't never seen none. You don't care nothin' about oil neither, I guess, eh, son?"

"I'm a cowman," Lee said simply, but when he went on regret was in his voice. "I'd heard there was good graze could be had south of here. I—I've done jobs not to my liking to get a stake. I've got it now but even if the graze is here I don't want any part of boom country. It's poison."

"There's good ranch land all to the south of here," Luke said. "The best range you ever seen."

Lee shook his head. "It's too close to trouble. As soon as I see a man I heard was here I'll be drifting."

Dusk settled into darkness and lights began to wink on up and down the street. Black Rock was situated in a small pocket. Just to the north mountains reared themselves in a tumbled heap, the highest still catching the light of an invisible sun. A stream, Rocky Creek, spilled out of the mountains and bordered one side of the town before cutting through a low ridge which formed the south wall of the pocket. The derrick and the coughing donkey engine lay between the town and the ridge and within fifty yards of the creek.

"Just over that ridge," Luke said as though he hadn't heard Lee, "is Clearwater Basin. Finest grass you ever seen. Jeff Mitchell's Block J takes in the whole basin. Jeff's been here for years and his spread is the biggest in the country. Young Frank Mulvey's Lazy M is next and it lies on the mesa beyond the Basin. A half-dozen other outfits border them two and they're all doin' well. There's plenty room for another'n too."

"Water?" Lee asked. Not that he was interested, he thought to himself, but because he'd been a cowman until drought had wiped him out four years before and he had to turn to other things.

"Rocky Crick supplies Clearwater Basin," Luke said, "so Jeff Mitchell ain't got a worry. Young Mulvey get his 'n from springs and all the others don't have no trouble. Maybe you'd ought to take a look."

"Maybe I ought," Lee said with growing interest. "Maybe I could

get far enough away from town so trouble couldn't reach me. Thanks, old-timer. I think I'll have a look tomorrow."

"Don't thank me," Luke protested. "I won't rest easy till I pay back the favor you done me. There's folks say I've lived by myself so long I'm crazy, but I know a heap they don't know. If there's ever anything I can do for you, son, you let me know."

Lee said, "Thanks, Luke. I'll be seeing you."

"And watch out for Cameron," Luke warned. "You've crossed a man that ain't used to being crossed. He won't like it."

CHAPTER II

LEE headed for the Black Rock Palace, which had been pointed out to him by the liveryman. It was the one brick building in town and was four stories high. The ground floor was taken up by a spacious lobby on one side of which was the dining room, on the other the bar. Suites and rooms were above.

When Lee entered the bar he stopped to stare in amazement. He knew Diamond Delaney and Delaney's way of doing things, but the Black Rock Palace surpassed anything he'd ever seen in elegance. The bar was tastefully dark and shining; the floor was carpeted; deep leather-cushioned chairs were scattered about.

This, then, was the headquarters of Black Rock's aristocracy, its moneyed men. What impressed Lee was the amount of money Diamond Delaney must have had to spend to renovate the old building and equip it as it was. That meant permanence. Delaney had built for a long time to come and he was not a fool. Lee knew something about the oil fields along the Coast but not much. He had a feeling that here was something big—big and dangerous.

The scattered men in the room lent emphasis to the idea of bigness. They sat about, easy-mannered and assured, sipping whiskey that couldn't even be bought in other saloons. All wore broadcloth and immaculate linen.

Lee approached the white-coated bartender and wondered at the quick frown on his face. Then Lee remembered he was dressed in Levis, highheeled boots, a dark shirt, vest and Stetson. It didn't matter. He said easily, "Where will I find Diamond Delaney?"

And there was something in his level eyes which caused the bartender to change his mind about giving utterance to the slighting remark he had on the tip of his tongue. The bartender said, "Mr. Delaney's office is off the lobby."

Lee went through the door that gave into the lobby. The same elegance was there and in the dining room beyond, which could be seen

through a glass-paneled door. The door to the office was beside the desk and, without speaking to the clerk, Lee knocked. The clerk lifted his head with a protest framed on his lips, but the door opened before he could speak. The gunman, Slinger, stood in the opening.

"I want to see Diamond," Lee said.

"You didn't take my tip, did you fellow?" Slinger leered. "Who wants to see Diamond?"

"Let him in, Slinger," a voice within ordered, and Lee passed through the door to stand before Diamond Delaney.

Brief surprise showed on Delaney's face. He was a big man of indeterminate age, but whatever his years his hair was as black as his somber eyes. There was a detached calmness about him that seldom allowed any inner emotion to stir its unbroken surface.

He rose at Trawick's entrance. He didn't offer to shake hands, but his tone was courteous as he said, "I hadn't heard you were in town, Trawick."

"I just got in," Lee said. He leaned his powerful frame against the doorjamb and stood easily with his hands in his pockets.

"I'll order a drink."

"Not now. Thanks."

Delaney sank back into his chair and said conversationally, "Be here long?"

"I don't know. I was heading this way, looking for range to buy, before I heard about the boom. I intend to look around." Lee paused and frowned. When I heard you were here I wanted to look you up. About Silver City, Diamond—I never got a chance to tell you. The people of Silver City wanted the town cleaned up. Your place had to go. There was nothing personal."

"I can understand that perhaps. But you're not a marshal now, Trawick."

"No, I'm not a marshal now." Lee was silent a moment, thinking, then, "I never cared much for the work. But I could handle it and I had to make another stake after the drought ruined me." Slowly he turned a contemptuous gaze upon Slinger, slouched against the window sill. His voice losts its pleasant drawl and had a sting to it when he said, "I see you still carry a gun dog, Diamond."

The gunman's eyes blazed venomously but Delaney said easily. "A man in my business sometimes needs a fast gun hand. The two I had in Silver City wouldn't come away with me."

"No," Lee said harshly. "They stayed behind to get me. They caught me in a cross fire."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know that." There was no mistaking the sincerity behind Delaney's words. Then a note of finality edged his voice. "They should have had more sense and they'd still be alive."

Lee nodded absently. He was relieved that Delaney hadn't been implicated in the try for his life, and the hardness of his humor drained away. He asked, "Is Linda with you, Diamond?"

Delaney nodded but said nothing, and Lee went on impersonally, "No decent father would drag his daughter from one hellhole to another. Linda deserves better than that, Diamond."

"She's going to get it," Delaney said. He paused, then continued with suppressed excitement, "Linda is going to have everything here. In time there will be fine houses, a theater, a society of gentlefolk. Already big men are here. When the well comes in there will be others. They'll bring their families and there will be plenty of decent people for Linda to run with. She'll have the money to do it; she'll be a leader among them."

"Is that what she wants" Lee asked gently.

"What else?" Delany said impatiently. "I tell you, Lee Trawick, Black Rock is going to be one of the richest towns in the nation."

"It looks like just another boom town to me with all of a boom town's rottenness."

"That will change. I haven't gone into this blind. I started out with a place in a town where two cattle-trails crossed. After that I was in on a half-dozen gold-strike towns. I've owned places in the tent cities that followed the railroad. It hasn't been easy but I've made money and put it away, waiting for the big chance to get in on something permanent. This is it."

"You're sure?"

"You think I'd have put thousands into this place without being sure? Man, this is big, the biggest thing that the West has ever known. And the beauty of it is that just a handful of men know how big it is. I'm one of them. Stuart Cameron has operated wells in Pennsylvania. He's sold everything back there and sunk it here. He knows what he's doing. He has bought all the land around Black Rock for back taxes. He has brought in Polacks from Pennsylvania because they can do more work than any two ordinary men and will work for half the wages. A big freight outfit is coming to haul the oil the fifty miles to the river. A river-barge company has been formed to take it on from there. In time the railroad will build into here."

Lee shook his head. "I don't like the sound of it. What sort of man is this Cameron?"

"He's smart. He thinks in terms of millions. But I didn't take a chance that Cameron might be promoting a wildcat boom here. I got hold of a geologist and sent him in here secretly. He took seismograph recordings and found that the whole area beneath Black Rock is a pool. I knew then that this was my chance. Cameron can have the oil. I'll make mine with this place and the others."

"You own the other saloons in town?"

"All of them. I figured the factions wouldn't mix. There's the Derrick for the Polacks and other oil workers, the Longhorn for cow hands from the ranches around and for cattlemen who don't want to pay the prices here, and the Red Dog will be ready for the teamsters when the freight outfit comes."

Lee felt depressed by Delaney's talk; it described an enterprise that was foreign to the West. He was a cowman; the West was bred into his being; and something that had nothing to do with the West of which he was a part was threatening to close in and strangle it. And the whole think was being engineered by men who were not Westerners and who cared nothing for the West.

Lee said quietly, "I'll be going now. Maybe I'll see you again, Diamond." Some unaccountable foreboding caused him to add, "I hope we won't ever be on opposite sides of a fight again."

Delaney had returned to his customary calmness and there was about him the look of a man who had perhaps talked too much. He said again, "You're not a marshal now, Trawick."

"No. No, I'm not a marshal now. Tell Linda I'm here. I'd like to see her."

"I hope you will," Delaney said noncommitally. "There ain't many men here I'd let see her—at present."

Lee nodded and left the office.

Delaney stared the way he had gone and shook his head slowly. "Of all the men in the world to come here it had to be Lee Trawick."

He noticed his silent gunman and added, "Let me give you some advice, Slinger. No matter what drives you don't ever tangle with that man."

Slinger was unimpressed. He said, "I reckon he can be taken."

"Not by you—or half a dozen like you." Delaney sat thoughtful for a moment, then suddenly jerked open a drawer and pulled out an addressed envelope. He tore the envelope and the enclosed letter in half. He spoke crisply, "Slinger, I had a letter today from Moccasin Nells. He's over in the county seat and wrote to ask if I had a job open for him. I didn't want to pay his price and was writing to tell him no. Things have changed. Get on your horse and ride to the county seat—now. Find Nells and tell him I want him."

Slinger was impressed then. He said, "Hell, this Trawick can't be that good."

"He is," Delaney said flatly. "Maybe he won't stay around. Even if he does there may not be trouble, but he's got almighty stubborn ideas about what he figures is right. I've got too much at stake to take a chance. Get going. Moccasin Nells is the only man on God's green earth that can stand up to Lee Trawick!"

CHAPTER III

LEE returned to the barroom, feeling the need of a drink. When he reached the bar the bartender said, "A man was just in here looking for you."

Lee looked up in surprise. "Nobody in town knows my name."

"He didn't call your name," the barman said, "but he described you."

"Who was he?"

"I didn't know him. He said he'd wait across the street."

Lee's first thought was that old Luke wanted him for something. But the fact that the man was waiting across the street instead of just outside the door rang a warning in his consciousness. It smelled like a trap and added up to Cameron and his gunman whom Lee had gun whipped. If there was going to be trouble Lee preferred to get it over with. He said, "Thanks," to the bartender, crossed the saloon and let himself out the back door.

He walked the length of several buildings before turning toward the street. When he emerged from between two buildings he looked back up the street and spotted an alert figure across from the Black Rock Palace. The boardwalks and even the street were thronged with men. Lee mixed with the crowd, crossed the street and drifted, unnoticed, with those on the other side. The first the lookout knew of his presence was when Lee spoke from directly beside him: "You the man that was looking for me?"

The man started violently and whirled. He licked his lips but said nothing.

"Well?" Lee said. "What is it?"

The stranger still didn't speak but unconsciously his eyes flicked to the alley behind him. Lee nodded. "The man that sent you is waiting in there. Well, let's go see him. You go first and I'll be right behind you."

Fear leaped to the man's eyes. He was trapped and so risked everything on a single chance to escape. He lashed out with all his strength, but Lee stepped inside that first crushing blow and with both hands smashed the man against the building. This had to be quick. Lee didn't want the man in the alley to be frightened away by a curious crowd. He would plan other ways of putting a bullet in Lee's back if the whole business wasn't settled now.

Lee took several vicious blows to the face in order to land his own. He connected with a wicked punch flush to the point of the man's jaw just as the first strollers slowed and began to mill. Lee caught the

lookout before he could fall and jammed him into an upright position against the building. Holding him with one hand, Lee turned to the gathering crowd and snapped, "Keep moving. It's all over."

It had all happened so fast not many had seen it and there was certainly nothing more to see. The crowd eddied and moved on. Lee kept the lookout propped up until he regained consciousness. Fear was a live thing in his eyes then. Lee took a firm grip in the back of his collar and shoved him toward the alley.

When they entered the dark recess the man whined, "For God's sake, mister! this is plain murder."

"That's what I figured," Lee said shortly. "Maybe you'd better sing out. Call your pal to come meet you."

The man called but he didn't follow Lee's instructions. He shouted, "Don't shoot, Lefty! He's right with me——"

Ahead of them a gun flamed and there was the solid impact of lead. The lookout grunted, coughed once and began to crumple. Lee cursed under his breath at the man's stupidity and at the cold-bloodedness of the hidden gunman. Lee let go of the sagging collar and snatched out his gun all in one motion. Again the gun ahead spoke. Lee slammed a shot at the gun flash ahead, then followed with two incredibly fast shots to either side and low down. The third was unnecssary.

The second shot had brought a broken sob. Lee waited tensely until he heard a body hit the ground, then ran forward. Shouts and the sound of running feet boiled up at the alley's mouth. Lee saw the body lying against the blackness of the ground and struck a match. The man was Cameron's gunman Lee had met that afternoon. He was thoroughly dead.

Lee straightened up and ran on. He decided to see Stuart Cameron.

Far below in the alley where the shooting had occurred Lee again made his way to the street and fell in with the throng. He returned to the bar of the Black Rock Palace. The bartender looked annoyed at his reappearance but Lee was in no mood to bicker. He ordered a drink and when it was served he asked, "Is Stuart Cameron in the room?"

The bartender shook his head. Lee, meaning to wait, turned and his glance raked the half-dozen occupants of the room and settled on a poker game at a rear table. The house gambler, indistinguishable from the other guests except by the fact that he was banking, was playing with three men. Fights that were forced upon him usually left Lee in a reckless state until his taut nerves had had opportunity to relax. He tossed off the drink and walked back to the poker game. The participants looked up and frowned when Lee dropped fifty dollars on the table.

"Mind if I sit in?" he asked.

For a moment there was silence; then a dandified player looked Lee

over from head to foot, excused himself and left the table. Lee's jaw tightened as the other two players appeared undecided as to what course to take. The gambler stepped into the breach. He said, "Not at all, Mr.——"

Trawick. Lee Trawick."

"My name is Don Lovelace," the gambler said. "Please sit down, Mr. Trawick, and I'll count out your chips. We're playing draw and there's no limit."

After that the other players saw no graceful way to leave the table so kept their seats. Lee dropped into the vacant chair and briefly scrutinized the gambler. Lovelace was smiling slightly to himself. He was young, around Lee's age, and even in the company of men who patronized the Palace his dress stood out for its good taste and meticulousness. He wore his clothes with an indifferent perfection matched by a casual ease of manner.

A few hands were played for small stakes; then the game settled into a duel between Lee and Lovelace. The other two players were continually forced out by the two formidable antagonists who were enjoying the test of each other's skill. They played for an hour and at the end of that period Lee and the gambler had about an equal amount in the game, money taken from the other two. Each had around three hundred dollars in chips.

Interest in the game had gradually eased Lee's tension, and as he played he began to take stock of his position in Black Rock. Without even having seen the man he had made an enemy of the big auger—Stuart Cameron had obviously ordered him to be shot down from the alley. Lee found himself wondering where Diamond Delaney stood. From all appearances Delaney was going to be one of the biggest men in Black Rock. That might mean a closer association with Cameron than his talk with Lee had indicated; whether or not he would openly line up against Lee was a thing worth knowing. Lee hadn't decided yet if he was going to stay in this country or move on but, if he should stay, it was important for him to know whether he and Delaney were to be friends or enemies.

Bets went around the table twice and the other two players dropped out. Lovelace ran the pot up until all the chips both had were in the center of the table.

Lee figured Lovelace had drawn to a straight or a flush and had made it or had drawn for a full house. If he hadn't made that he still had three of a kind. In any event, Lee knew his pair stood no chance and that was what he wanted.

When Lee pushed the last of his chips into the pot the gambler murmured, "Are you calling me?"

Lee smiled slightly and shook his head. "Let me have five hundred dollars' worth of chips."

In a few minutes they had raised one another that amount. Lee regarded his cards thoughtfully, then said, "I've got seven hundred in. May as well make it a thousand if you'll let me have another two hundred."

The chips were counted out, shoved to the center, and Lovelace flipped his cards over. He had hit his straight. Lee tossed in his cards face down. Before he dealt Lovelace waited and the pause became awkward. Finally he said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Trawick. You owe the bank seven hundred dollars."

"I know—and I haven't got it," Lee said in pained embarrassment.

The silence that greeted his admission was stupendous. Lovelace lifted an eybrow slightly and the other two men smirked scornfully. Lovelace repeated, "You haven't got it?"

"Well, no," Lee said slowly. "I shouldn't have stayed with that hand but I thought I had the cards." He reached for a pad and pencil, scribbled on a sheet of paper and tossed it over. "There's my I O U for the amount."

Lovelace glanced down at the I O U, looked up and shrugged indifferently. He said, "You don't look like a man who would pull a thing like that." Without turning his head he called, "Waiter, tell Diamond to come here."

The scene, subdued as it was, was producing interest all over the room. Lee sat quietly, his face impassive, but he, too, was pleased. In a belt around his waist he had over five thousand dollars, the money with which he was going to buy range and a small herd. In time he would make good the debt but at the moment he wanted to know where he stood with Diamond Delaney.

Delaney entered the bar and approached the table with a questioning look on his face. Lovelace said, "This man went down seven hundred dollars on a hand and hasn't the money to make good. He has offered his I O U. His name, he says, is Lee Trawick."

Delaney turned to Lee and said, "If you will step into my office we'll settle this there."

"Just a minute, Delaney," a voice broke in from the outer edge of the little crowd.

Delaney turned and spoke deferentially: "Yes, Mr. Cameron?"

"Let me have that I O U," Cameron said, coming forward. "Here's the seven hundred dollars for it."

CHAPTER IV

LEE'S first reaction was one of amazement. He hadn't noticed the newcomer to the group. Lee turned slowly and regarded Stuart Cameron. He was in his early forties and slightly built. Lee thought he had never seen such arrogance in a man's face and bearing. It was not arrogance that took the form of bragging or bullying; rather it was the cold assurance of an iron will and a ruthless ambition.

As Cameron took seven hundred-dollar bills from a wallet Lee said gently, "Thanks, mister, for your interest. But this is my business. I'll settle in my own way."

"Nonsense," Cameron said briefly. "You owe a debt; you yourself haven't the money to pay it, so I'm making it good. It is as simple as that."

"Not quite," Lee said. "It happens that I owe the debt to Diamond Delaney. I prefer to keep owing it to him."

Cameron removed an expensive cigar from his mouth and frowned. "It seems," he said slowly, "that the man to decide this would be Delaney."

Lee left a growing anger. His simple experiment had backfired and all he wanted now was to disentangle himself. Somewhat sharply he said, "It happens that Diamond knows me. He knows that that I O U is good."

"Well, Delaney?" Cameron asked.

But Delaney was in a spot from which he could extricate himself without reasonbly offending either Lee or Stuart Cameron. He shrugged and said, "All that matters to me is the money."

"Then that settles it," Cameron nodded. Before Lee could move Cameron tossed the money on the table and pocketed the I O U. He looked down at Lee and smiled coldly. "Will you join me in a drink?"

Keeping his anger in check, Lee followed him to the bar. Before settling this business Lee wanted to know what it was all about. And he had other business with Stuart Cameron.

Cameron ordered brandy and inhaled its aroma fastidiously before sipping it and setting the goblet down. He turned to Lee then and remarked conversationally, "I understand the best gunman in my pay had an altercation with you this afternoon. It seems my man came off second best."

"You sound like you've got a crew of gunmen," Lee said.

"Around a dozen."

"Why?"

"Because it is my policy to make sure of everything I do. It may

be that I will have no use for them. Time will tell. Meanwhile they provide insurance of a sort."

"You're one gunman short, Cameron," Lee said bluntly. "That same skunk tried to gun me down in an alley awhile ago."

"He was a fool," Cameron said impatiently. "I told him so this afternoon when I fired him."

Lee stared with narrowed eyes at the man beside him. It was impossible to be absolutely sure whether or not he was speaking the truth, but Lee decided that he was. That settled the question of who was responsible for the attempted murder and left only the matter of the I O U.

"I pay for the best and I expect to get it," Cameron went on. "You seem to be the best—that's why you're going to work for me."

"You think," Lee whipped out, "you've got enough damned money to hire my guns?"

"Not at all." Cameron smiled bleakly. "I must confess that when I saw you I formed a higher opinion of you than that. Consequently, your momentary recklessness at poker proved highly convenient. I don't think you would hire your guns, Trawick, nor do I think a man of your temperament would relish going to jail. You see the sheriff of the county is within a two-hour ride and"—he tapped his pocket significantly—"you could be sent to jail for this worthless I O U. You haven't really much choice, have you?"

Furious rage whitened Lee's face.

Cameron sipped his brandy appreciatively and said, "I have been looking for a man of your caliber. I have a special job for you." He turned and raised his metallic voice to include everyone in the room. "Gentlemen, Black Rock is on the verge of unprecedented prosperity. Already the town is in need of a restraining hand. Since we have no mayor or town council I think those of us here may consider ourselves a representative commitee of citizens. I nominate this man, Lee Trawick, I believe I heard his name called, for town marshal, and if there is no dissenting voice we will consider him elected."

A few disinterested "Ayes" came from over the room and two or three men chuckled knowingly. Cameron turned, produced a badge which he had apparently bought for the purpose and pinned it on Lee's vest.

Curiously, this crowning effrontery of Cameron's, the public buying of a marshal, served to steady Lee. His furious anger, no less powerful, became constrained enough for him to think. He saw Don Lovelace smiling cynically. Diamond Delaney was the one man in the room who thought Cameron might be making a mistake, and his eyes mirrored slight suprise that Lee allowed the badge to stay on his vest.

Lee turned back to the bar and drank. He set the glass down and

said, "It hadn't occurred to you that I might refuse this badge, had it?"

"No," Cameron said, "it hadn't. You see, I have your I O U."

Lee had had his share of trouble, but Cameron was the first man who had ever stirred him to fierce, inplacable hate. That was why he had decided to let the badge stay on his vest. That badge placed him on the inside of things. When he had learned the direction developments were going to take and where he fitted in he could make his next move.

"All right, Cameron," he said, "you're sure of yourself. Don't be surprised, though, if you find you've made a mistake."

"I back my judgment," Cameron murmured coldly. "Now that we understand one another we may as well be amiable. You're in a spot to do yourself some good, Trawick. If you're smart it won't be necessary for me to hold this I O U as a threat. I'd prefer for you to realize the possibilities in your job and cash in on them. Our relationship would be more satisfactory. Money is going to be made here, millions. You may as well get your share."

"Why pick on me?"

"I've been looking for the right man for marshal. You're it. You have the fastest gun that has come here. That may prove useful to me, but there's an even more important reason. My geologist hasn't made his final report. Certain moves may be necessary when he does, and if they are I want a man as marshal who is satisfactory to the sheriff so he won't come poking around here. You will be acceptable to him.

"Don't be a fool, Trawick. Cash in. I'll turn over a couple of my boys to you to serve as deputy marshals. They can do the ordinary police work. If you're wise you will get in on the ground floor here. Dress well and move in the right circles. Get yourself a room here at the Palace. Get to know the big men that are here and those that are coming. I'll give you a start by listing a hundred shares of Panhandle Petroleum in your name."

"Any immediate orders?" Lee asked sarcastically.

"Yes," Cameron said and smiled briefly. "There's a building in the center of town that I need, occupied by an odd charcater called Crazy Luke. The first thing in the morning throw him out!"

CHAPTER V

LEE was up early the next morning because his habits were those of a cowman. He had taken a room at the Palace because the other cheaper hotel was full. When Lee came down to the lobby the hotel and the town were unbelievably quiet. The Palace guests were not

given to early hours and the rest of the town was sleeping off an uproarious night.

Lee entered the dining room and stopped abruptly just within the door. There was only one other person in the room and, though her back was to him, Lee saw with quickened interest that it was Linda Delaney. Slowly he walked over and stood beside her.

He said, "Well, Linda?"

She looked up swiftly and cried, "Lee! I didn't know you were here."

"I told Diamond last night to tell you."

"I haven't seen him," she answered. "I don't very often, you know."

"No. You don't keep the same hours." Lee looked down into Linda's upturned face and was stirred as he had been in the past in her presence, though he wasn't sure just what his feelings in regard to her were.

Linda Delaney was pretty. She might have been beautiful except for the brooding unhappiness that shadowed her eyes and face. The expensive, fashionable clothes she wore only served to emphasize the expressionless countenance she habitually assumed. Lee knew her attitude was her only defense against the life to which she had been subjected for a long number of years. Pity stirred him and with it something of irritation.

But Linda's mask had momentarily given way to an expression of pleasure. She said, "Sit down, Lee, and order breakfast. You don't seem very glad to see me."

"I am," Lee said simply and after he had ordered repeated, "I am glad to see you, Linda. But I'm sorry to see you dragged into the middle of what's going on here."

"Diamond has his life to live," Linda said. "I'm just a piece of chattel that he doesn't quite know what to do with."

"So he drags you from one hellhole to another," Lee said shortly. "If you want to get out it must be early before the town wakes. The rest of the time you are practically a prisoner."

"It has been worse," Linda said indifferently. "At least this hotel is better. And Diamond believes things are going to be different here in time. There is no sentimentality between Diamond and me, but I suppose he is fond of me. He dresses me well and lets me have what I want."

"Is that enough?"

"You know it isn't. I'm glad that you are here, Lee."

Lee looked up quickly. He knew Linda's habit of saying whatever she chose to say but at the moment he couldn't tell what lay behind her words. Her eyes were bright and her face more animated than he had ever seen it. But just at that moment she saw the badge on his vest. Slowly the fire in her eyes died.

"So you're wearing a badge again," she said. "One day, Lee, you're

going to run up against something too big for you to handle. This may be it. There are no decent citizens to back you as there were in Silver City. The marshal of Black Rock will be Stuart Cameron's man."

"He put the badge on me," Lee acknowledged.

Momentary surprise showed in her eyes; then she shook her head. "You haven't sold yourself to Mr. Cameron?"

"He seems to think I have."

"Then you are fooling with dynamite. You don't know what you are up against here, Lee. I do. Your integrity will get you killed or, worse, break you. Get out, Lee, while there's time."

"It may be that I'll be needed here."

"And I suppose that soon I'll be moving on—to somewhere. You and Diamond will cross, of course."

"I don't see why we should." Lee frowned. "But really I have no intention of being marshal of Black Rock. Cameron put the badge on me and I let it stay for the time being. There are some things I want to know."

"And when you learn the answers you won't leave. Go now, Lee, while there's time!"

"Is your warning," Lee asked carefully, "for my good or your own?"

Linda looked directly at him, considering her answer, but before she could speak Don Lovelace came into the dining room and headed straight for their table. To cover his disappointment Lee poured himself another cup of coffee. The gambler came up, and if he was surprised to see them together there was no evidence of it on his face. His dress was immaculate and, despite the fact that he must have played late the night before, he looked fresh and keen.

"Good morning, Linda," Lovelace said easily.

"Hello, Don," Linda replied. "Mr. Lovelace, Mr.——"

"I've already met Trawick," Lovelace said briefly. There was no rancor in his tone, but he glanced at the badge and his smile was sardonic.

Lee nodded. He didn't blame the gambler for believing the worst, but it didn't matter to Lee what Lovelace thought. It did impress him, however, that Lovelace and Linda were apparently on intimate terms, and Lee wasn't sure how much that mattered to him.

"You asked me to sit at your table last night, Lovelace," Lee said. "I'd like to return the favor."

"Not with the same result, I hope," Lovelace said offhandedly, pulling back a chair.

Lee laughed quietly. He liked the gambler and was curious about him. The man had left a past somewhere. Linda had grown quiet, and a frown puckered her forehead as though she were seeking the answer to some puzzling question.

And then from the street outside came a growing swell of sound. Scattered voices yelled back and forth the length of the street, then were followed by an insistent and continuous clamor. Running feet passed through the lobby and pounded up the stairs. Shortly after that doors on the floors above began to slam and an excited mumur of voices drifted through the halls.

"Wonder what's up?" Lee said.

"It seems," Lovelace remarked, "that the marshal of a town would know what's going on in his baliwick."

"Do you always have to be facetious, Don?" Linda asked wearily. "I'm not in the mood for it."

Men could be heard descending the stairs and a laborer in rough work clothes popped his head in the door, yelled, "The well's ready to come in," and disappeared.

"Ah, so that's it," Lovelace said. "Now, many a man will have the chance to drown his soul in oil."

Stuart Cameron was the first to enter the dining room and order coffee. He was closely followed by his friends and associates. Some of them were still knotting their cravats, and all talked excitedly. Cameron was fully dressed and there was no trace of excitement in his cold face. Diamond Delaney entered the dining room to speed the servants in waiting upon the guests.

"Would it be worth while bothering to see the well come in?" Linda asked.

"It's interesting enough," Lovelace replied.

Lee rose. "If you will excuse me I'm going now." He looked down at Linda. "I'll see you again."

"You're staying then, Lee?" Linda asked quietly.

"I don't know yet. I'm just going to take a look."

"And you will learn the answers to what you want to know. It will be too late then to get out. Yes, I hope you'll see me again. Be careful, Lee. You may find this too big to handle."

CHAPTER VI

LEE nodded and turned abruptly away. When he stepped into the street he was caught up in a whirl of jostling, noisy men. Lee allowed himself to be swept along toward the derrick below town. As he passed Crazy Luke's store he saw the old prospector standing behind a dirty pane with a shotgun cradled in his arms.

When Lee reached the derrick he was surprised at the size of the crowd packed around it. He pushed out of the throng to a slight promontory from which he could watch the strange drama unfold. The

timber derrick was a hundred feet high with a twenty-foot base, and the rig was mounted on one side of it. The drillers had finished their work and now tool dressers and laborers, under the supervision of a burly Irish foreman, were pulling and disjointing the drilling tools.

Lee was conscious of movement near him and turned to observe Slinger and several men coming his way. Slinger's companions were hard cases, probably part of Cameron's gun crew, Lee thought. Though they were in the pay of different men Slinger would fraternize with others of his kind so long as their bosses were not at odds.

The men halted before Lee and Slinger grinned insolently. "Mornin', Marshal," he drawled. "Some of boys was wonderin' if you meant to do anything about the murder last night. Or maybe you hadn't heard. Lefty Mears was shot in an alley."

"Yeah," Lee said quietly, "I heard."

"Well, what you gonna do about it? Some of the boys here were pals of Lefty's."

"Is that a fact" Lee stepped squarely before them and said, "Lefty was an alley-shootin' rat. I reckon any pals of his would be the same breed. Anybody think any different?"

The eyes of the hard cases blazed wickedly, but the way Lee had stepped into them backed them down. Slinger said, "Seems like you're on the prod, Marshal. We was just askin'."

"Well, you've found out," Lee snapped. "And if there's any more shooting from alleys there's be some more unsolved killings. And if I can't find out who's doing the shooting I'll just figure it was you, Slinger. Get it?"

Slinger's trip of the night before to see Moccasin Nells and the success of his mission caused him to grin viciously. "I got a idea, Marshal," he said, "that you ain't gonna be with us long. It'll shore be a sad funeral."

"If you want to go to work on that idea," Lee said sarcastically, "I'm ready."

"Not me." Slinger shrugged. "But the time will come and I'll dance at yore funeral. Let's go, boys."

The men passed on and Lee turned back toward the derrick. The string of tools had been cleared and carried far to one side and a team of mules was dragging the donkey engine away. The crowd about the derrick began to back up, shoving and cursing the press from behind. Rocky Creek flowed fifty yards beyond the well, and in the shade of trees that lined its near bank Cameron and the moneyed men of the Black Rock Palace stood. A little to one side Linda and Don Lovelace watched the proceedings. A man dressed in laced boots and khaki shirt rode through the gap made by Rocky Creek in the ridge that separated the town and Clearwater Basin. Sun glinted on thick eye-glasses as

he lifted his horse to a run at sight of the activity about the base of the derrick. In a moment he was conferring with the crew foreman and shortly he turned and waved the crowd back still further.

"What the hell's gonna happen now?" a prospector below Lee asked.

"See that shell-looking thing?" an oil worker pointed. "It's a torpedo holding about fifteen quarts of nitroglycerin. When oil-bearin' rock is struck the tools are pulled and the torpedo lowered into the hole. A go-devil is dropped down on top of the torpedo to explode it. Rock formations all around the well are cracked, and oil flows into a pool at the base of the well. Then it's pumped out unless it's a gusher."

"Hell of a way to mine," the prospector grunted.

Workmen carefully lowered the torpedo into the shaft, then set a heavy weight or go-devil in the mouth of the shaft. The foreman took hold of the rope attached to the go-devil trigger and immeditely the other laborers scattered. The bespectacled man in laced boots, whom Lee presumed to be Cameron's geologist, looked toward the group under the trees and shouted, "All ready, Mr. Cameron!"

"Go ahead!" Cameron's metallic voice answered.

Soon a muffled explosion reared up through the shaft and the ground shook so violently those nearest the well were thrown to their knees.

There was a breathless moment of silence; then a sound like a long-drawn sigh issued from the shaft. The sigh suddenly turned into a rushing hiss that grew and grew until it was a mighty roar, and then a powerful stream geysered from the shaft.

"A gusher!" tore from a hundred throats, and men went crazy. They flung their hats aloft, pounded one another madly. Higher and higher swept the gusher until it was throwing a six-inch stream fifty feet above the top of the hundred-foot derrick. This gusher meant money, millions for some but plenty for everybody. So men shouted and swore and wept and sang. Lee watched that mighty drama with a sinking heart. He was a cowman and this thing had no place in the West.

CHAPTER VII

IT was noon when Lee left the well and walked thoughtfully back to town. The streets were deserted. But Crazy Luke sat on the porch of the building which was his home.

As Lee came up Luke called, "Seems like they struck a bonanza."

"Seems like it."

"I don't like it," Luke said disgustedly. "What's oil good for? You can't carry it in a poke; you can't play poker with it; you can't buy nothin' with it. What the hell is it good for?"

"I reckon it's got its uses," Lee said. "A lot of men are going to a lot of trouble——"

"Say," Luke interrupted, "ain't you wearin' the marshal's badge? Well, I'm shore glad to know that. I feared they'd make some skunk marshal."

"They probably will. Stuart Cameron pinned this badge on."

"He!l!" Luke snorted. "If he hadn't o' had oil in his eyes or had knowed this country he'd of seen you wasn't his kind."

"He thinks I am," Lee said slowly. "My first orders were to throw you out of this building."

"Seems like you're sort of slow 'bout doin' it. But watch him, son. He's slick. An' speakin' o' smells, there comes the skunk."

Lee turned to observe Stuart Cameron walking briskly toward the Palace on the other side of the street. When he was opposite them he said briefly, "Come to my room in half an hour, Trawick. There are some things I want to see you about."

Lee's lips tightened at the curt order but he didn't answer. Luke watched Lee shrewdly and said, "He galls you mightily, don't he? Watch him, son."

"You watch him, too, Luke," Lee said slowly. "I won't be marshal long. Cameron will be surer of his man next time. His next marshal will take this place away from you."

"He hadn't better," Luke said darkly. "If Cameron bothers me he's gonna bite off a big chunk of somethin' he won't like. I know things other folks don't know."

Lee looked at the old man thoughtfully, wondering if he were just a little queer. He said, "What do you know, Luke?"

"Plenty," the old-timer answered mysteriously. "If Cameron ever bothers me he's gonna be sorry. And he better let you alone. You're the only man in town has paid me any mind. If he ever bothers you you let me know. We'll fix him."

"Thanks, Luke," Lee said gravely. "I'll remember."

A half-dozen horsemen whirled into the lower end of the street and galloped forward in a cloud of dust.

"Jeff Mitchell from the Basin!" Luke exclaimed excitedly. "That's young Frank Mulvey owns the Lazy M ridin' alongside of him. The rest is other ranchers beyond the Basin. If you ask me, they're loaded for bear!"

Lee didn't need to be told that. He knew cowmen and he knew the signs. They rode straight to the Palace, dismounted stiffly and stalked inside.

Lee looked the way they had gone and a premonition of trouble was strong within him. He nodded to Luke, stepped off the boardwalk and headed the way the ranchers had gone.

Lee entered the hotel as a bar waiter came down the stairs and said to the cowmen: "Mr. Cameron said for you gentlemen to have seats. He'll see you in a few minutes."

The ranchers glowered impatiently but made no answer. Jeff Mitchell turned restlessly and saw Lee standing just within the lobby. He saw the badge on Lee's vest and grunted, "So Black Rock's already got a marshal. That means you're one of this oil crowd. Better stand clear, Marshal. We don't want any interference from a Cameron hired hand——"

"I'm not a Cameron hired hand," Lee said flatly.

"If I'd looked closer I'd have seen you're a cowman yourself." Mitchell came forward with outstretched hand. "I'm Jeff Mitchell from Clearwater Basin."

Lee called his own name and shook hands, warmed by the forthright honesty and fairness of the rancher. But the young man beside him burst out in a rush of reckless temper: "What you first said still goes, Jeff. Any marshal of Black Rock would belong to Cameron——"

"Easy, Frank," Mitchell broke in sharply. "I made a mistake until something different is proved. Trawick, this is Frank Mulvey who owns a spread on the mesa beyond the Basin."

Lee nodded to Mulvey. He was a large young man and there was no friendliness in his face. Jeff Mitchell introduced the other four ranchers, and Lee felt a kinship to these men. They were his kind; they, not the Black Rock Palace and the oil workers, were the West.

Lee said, "I'm glad to meet some cowmen in this country. You've come to see Stuart Cameron. Mind telling me why?"

"That stinkin' oil has fouled Rocky Creek!" Jeff Mitchell said angrily. "My cows can't drink with that scum coverin' the stream from bank to bank. Cameron's got to do something about that oil and damned quick."

Lee nodded soberly, turned toward the stairs. "I'll go up and tell him he'd better see you right away."

Lee knocked on Cameron's door and entered at Cameron's metallic command. The door gave into the living room of a suite which was being used as a combination sitting room and office. When Lee entered Cameron was dictating a letter to his secretary, a pale, mousy-looking little man. Cameron waved Lee to a seat and continued with what he was doing. When he had finished the letter he nodded to the secretary who quietly withdrew. Cameron looked up and frowned to find Lee still standing.

"Sit down," Cameron said. "There are some matters——"

"They can wait," Lee said slowly. "There are a half-dozen ranchers downstairs who want to see you."

"Oh yes. Well, I haven't time right now. Later, perhaps."

"I'd see them now," Lee said gently. "Oil from the gusher has ruined the water supplying one of the ranches.

"I can't help that," Cameron said impatiently. "Let them get water somewhere else. Now about that building I want——"

"Wait, Cameron. This had better be settled first. You're new to this country. You don't know it or its people. Men like Jeff Mitchell won't sit back quietly and let what is theirs be taken away from them."

Cameron studied the quiet man before him for a minute, then said cuttingly, "It sounds as though you are giving me advice, Trawick. I don't want it and it's not your place to give it. I've got an I O U of yours that could land you in jail for a good stretch. Don't forget that again and hereafter do as you're told. And understand this: I don't give a snap of my fingers for all the ranchers in this country. If they don't like what's going on they can move on somewhere else. If they want to fight I've got a good crew of gunmen, and if they're not enough I'll hire more. And you are going to lead my gunmen in any fight that comes off. Is all that clear?"

The ruthless ambition and arrogance of the man finally snapped Lee's control. He started for Cameron, but a sudden knock on the door brought Lee up short and put an abrupt end to the scene.

Cameron snapped, "Who is it?"

"Rawlings," came the answer.

Cameron told the man to enter and Lee turned away to get a grip on himself. Rawlings was the geologist Lee had seen several times that day. The man came into the room peering through his thick spectacles. He had a field book in his hand and a great many papers.

"Well, Rawlings," Cameron said in a satisfied voice, "you're no oil witch. You're an A-grade rock hound. You said the well would bring in oil but you didn't say it would be a gusher."

"I knew there was oil here," Rawlings said doubtfully. "But, Mr. Cameron, I warned you not to sink a well until I had completely surveyed the country."

"An astute man seizes his opportunities, Rawlings," Cameron said complacently. "The gusher proves I was right to go ahead."

"Partly," the geologist said timidly. "But I finished my investigation this morning. I had just got through in Clearwater Basin when the well was shot. I've spent the morning checking the well and it confirms my reports."

"What are you getting at?" Cameron asked sharply.

"It isn't very good news, I'm afraid," Rawlings answered worriedly. "Years or maybe centuries ago an earthquake threw up the ridge south of town. That ridge broke the geological formations, in effect raised a barrier between the cup here where Black Rock is and the basin beyond."

"Damn all that! What are you getting at?"

"There's just a small pocket of oil here, Mr. Cameron. The big pool is in Clearwater Basin. Mr. Mitchell's ranch is on top of the biggest oil pool that has ever been discovered."

CHAPTER VIII

CAMERON came out of his chair like a shot and stood gripping the top of his desk. "All right, Rawlings. We've sunk a well on a small pocket——"

"I warned you not to do it until I had completed my investigation," the geologist burst out. "I told you it would take time——"

"Am I holding you responsible?" Cameron asked acidly. "Quit looking like a scared cur and give me the information I want. You're sure about Clearwater Basin?"

"Positive. It's the biggest pool that's ever been discovered."

"All right. Now how big is this pocket here? How long will it produce oil?"

"I can't say for sure," Rawlings answered. "But I think you'll get oil enough to pay for the cost of the well."

"If I sink two more wells I'll empty the pocket that much faster, won't I?"

"Yes," Rawlings gasped, "but there isn't oil enough to pay for the cost of two more wells. I strongly advise against——"

"I pay you for geological information, not advice about how to run my business," Cameron stated coldly. "If I sink two more wells the production of Pandle Petroleum will be tremendous, even if temporary. The discovery here will send oil stock booming. I could make a killing even on this pocket by selling shares and then leaving the sheered lambs to hold the sack. I could make thousands that way, but there's another way I can make millions."

Lee stirred and the molding of the wall bit into his back. Rawlings said stubbornly, "If you sink two more wells the pocket will be dry in a short while. In a month I'd say. It wouldn't pay you."

"It will pay me," Cameron said. "All told I've invested around seventy-five thousand dollars here. I've got cash enough to sink two more wells if they don't cost over fifteen thousand apiece and I'll sink them close to the one that's come in so they won't. That will take all my ready money but I'll own all the stock in Panhandle Petroleum until production hits its peak. Then I'll be able to sell minor shares for more than I've got invested and will still own the majority stock."

"But by then," Rawlings burst out, "the pocket will be dry!"

"By then," Cameron said softly, "I'll own Clearwater Basin."

For a moment there was no sound in the room and noises penetrated from the street in muted tones. The sounds indicated that men were drifting back to town from the well but, despite the fact that the walls muffled the noise, it still carried an undertow of excitement.

Cameron looked sharply at Rawlings and said, "There's no need for me to warn you not to utter a word about your findings or our talk? The consequences wouldn't be pleasant if you did."

"I work for you," Rawlings muttered.

"Don't forget that," Cameron said curtly. "What I make here I'll use to bring in oil in Clearwater Basin. When I do that I'll pay you a bonus." He sat quietly a moment, ignoring Lee, then said, "All right, Rawlings, you can go now. There are several ranchers downstairs in the lobby. Send them up."

When Rawlings left Cameron's suite someone else had just closed the door of the adjoining room and was hurrying off down the hall toward the back. Rawlings peered through his thick glasses into the gloom of the hall but his eyes were too poor for him to recognize the man. The geologist shrugged, thinking the person was just a guest of the hotel, and turned down the front stairs to deliver his message to the ranchers.

Lee hadn't moved or spoken when the cowmen their patience worn thin with waiting, stalked into the room. Cameron rose and stood behind his desk; a thin smile was on his face but his eyes were cold as a rattler's.

"Come in, gentlemen," he said affably. "Sorry to keep you waiting but there were some matters demanding my attention. You are Mr. Mitchell, I presume?"

"That's right," the old cowman said gruffly. He then called off the names of the men with him, then said, "We're here on serious business, Cameron."

"Then by all means let's be seated to discuss it," Cameron said pleasantly. He sat but the others remained belligerently standing. "I've an idea what you are here for. My marshal there has told me something about it."

Jeff Mitchell threw a sharp look at Lee, who pushed away from the wall, but the old cowman's business was with Cameron. He said bluntly, "This damned oil you've sprung out of the ground is ruining my water, mister. In no time at all that'll ruin me. I don't aim to be ruined. What are you goin' to do about it?"

"Well, now," Cameron said chidingly, "there's no need for you to come here with blood in your eye. We can discuss what has inadvertently happened in a reasonable manner and work out a fair solution."

In a milder voice Mitchell said, "What are you goin' to do about the oil?"

"Whatever I can." Cameron smiled apologetically. "My men are trying to cap the well. It may take one or several days but it will be done as quickly as possible, for that waste is costing me thousands of dollars—as well as causing you trouble."

"Well," Jeff growled, "I could get by a few days if that'll be the end of it."

"I was coming to that." Cameron frowned. "The truth is, that won't be the end of it. I intend to sink two more wells immediately, others later. Seepage and waste will always affect that stream."

"Hell, Jeff," Frank Mulvey burst out, "he's the same as sayin' you're done. The best thing is for us to get our crews and clean this town out of everybody connected with this stinkin' oil."

"Wait, Frank," Jeff said thoughtfully. "Let's hear him out."

"Thank you, Mr. Mitchell," Cameron said suavely. "Now as I say, I'm afraid that stream will always be unfit for stock. And if the oil is not produced by me it will be produced by someone else."

"Then," Jeff said tightly, "you are sayin' I'm done."

"No"—Cameron smiled—"I'm not. If my business ruins yours, Mr. Mitchell, then the only fair thing for me to do is to buy you out. I'm prepared to do that. Your ranch is in Clearwater Basin, I believe. How many acres do you own?"

"Around ten thousand," Jeff snorted, "but if you think I'm goin' to sell——"

"I'll pay you five dollars an acre," Cameron went on, "and of course I have no need for your stock so you can take it with you. Is that a satisfactory price, Mr. Mitchell?"

"It's too damned high," Jeff growled. "Range, even as good range as mine, ain't worth more 'n three dollars a acre."

"I realize that," Cameron said shrewdly. "But I consider it fair to pay you more because you'll have to put up new buildings wherever you go and you are giving up your home. To be perfectly frank, I couldn't afford to go to such lengths ordinarily, but in time I expect to get back a good part of what this will cost me. Black Rock will grow and I should be able to sell lots enough for homes to get back most of the cost."

"I hate to leave the Basin," Jeff said, "but it shore ain't no good to me without water."

"You mean," Frank Mulvey broke out hotly, "you're thinkin' about takin' him up?"

"It's a good offer, Frank."

"Hell, yes. But what about the rest of us? You pull out and leave us out on a limb!"

"Hold yore temper, Frank," Jeff said shortly. "I ain't ever left my friends out on a limb. As I see it, I'm the only one that's bein' hurt.

Neither you nor any of the rest of you get yore water from Rocky Creek, so this oil tomfoolery won't hurt you any. I don't want to leave the Basin, but it looks like I'll have to and Cameron is shore bein' square about it."

"Shore, you're cleanin' up," Mulvey snapped, "while the rest of us——" Abruptly he broke off and was silent. When he spoke again some new note had crept into his voice. He tried to appear gruff but sounded almost pleased when he said, "Maybe you're right, Jeff. If you think so go ahead."

Lee had been completely out of the whole discussion, but his keen mind hadn't missed the slightest detail from Cameron's suave treachery to the amazing about-face of Mulvey. Lee couldn't fathom the young rancher's abrupt change of heart. Lee was slow to judge a man, but it had seemed to him that Mulvey had objected to Jeff Mitchell's selling out simply because he resented the good price the old rancher was getting for his spread. If that were true then Mulvey had ceased objecting because he had suddenly discovered some advantage he would get out of the deal.

The truth was Mulvey had remembered that with Jeff Mitchell out of the Basin he would be the biggest rancher left. And if the town were here to stay it would be a constant market for beef, a market Frank Mulvey could control without competition from Jeff Mitchell.

Lee didn't know what was in Mulvey's mind but he was not sure the young rancher was a man another could call friend.

"I'm sorry you have to leave your home, Mr. Mitchell," Cameron said sympathetically but elation was strong within him. "Under the circumstances I'm doing what I can to make it right."

"You're bein' more than fair," Jeff said.

"Then I'll have my lawyers draw up the papers immediately. If you can stay in town for an hour everything will be ready. We may as well get it over with."

"All right. You're payin' me more than the ranch is worth."

"Maybe not!" Lee said, and every eye in the room snapped to him as he walked slowly to the center of the group. Cameron lunged half out of his chair, incredulity twisting his features.

"What's that?" old Jeff asked curiously.

"Maybe," Lee said quietly, "Cameron's not paying you more than your spread is worth. Maybe he's just paying you a small fraction of what it's worth."

"Get out, Trawick!" Cameron said harshly, his face a white mask of fury. "Get out of this room and stay out until I send for you."

Lee turned to face Cameron squarely. "You've made a mistake on me all along the line, mister," he said. "Maybe I can set you straight now."

Cameron jerked open a drawer of his desk and plunged his hand in, but Lee's voice whipped out, "Don't do that, Cameron! I don't want to have to kill you."

Cameron paused ,then slowly drew his hand out empty and straightened up. His voice low with fury, he said, "Are you getting out of here?"

"Not till I tell Mitchell what you're trying to pull," Lee answered evenly.

"What the hell is this?" the old rancher exploded.

Lee turned to the puzzled cowman who had watched the play with growing tension. Lee said, "Cameron is trying to take you in, Mitchell. He learned just a little while ago that he's sunk his well on small diggin's. The mother lode is in Clearwater Basin. Your ranch is on a pool of oil, Mitchell."

"What?"

"That's right. I guess your ranch is worth a million, maybe more."

The old rancher whirled on Cameron and thundered, "So you tried to steal me blind, you son of a skunk! I'd ought to horsewhip you. Maybe I'll sell my land sooner or later, but it won't ever be to you at any price. If you ever so much as set foot in the Basin I'll gun you."

Cameron didn't answer and his venomous eyes never left Lee.

Frank Mulvey broke in: "Where do you come in on all this, Trawick?"

Lee looked sharply at Mulvey and in his eyes read a thwarted purpose. His resentment at Lee's interference was fast building into active hate. Lee ignored him, instead addressed himself to Jeff Mitchell. "Could you use a man?" he asked quietly.

"A cow hand, I take it?" the old rancher said fiercely.

"That's right. A cow hand."

"I can. I pay forty and found." Jeff set his hat more firmly on his head and snapped, "Let's ride."

"If you men will go ahead," Lee said, "I'll catch up with you on the way. I've a thing or two to settle first."

Jeff stalked out of the room and the other ranchers silently followed. Lee took off the marshal's badge and tossed it onto the desk. "That was your first mistake, Cameron," he said.

In a voice flat with anger but remarkably controlled Cameron said, "I underestimated you, Trawick. I won't again."

"I figured you weren't through." Lee nodded.

"I haven't even started. I'll get you, Trawick. I'll get you so bad you'll wish you'd never been born. And I'll get Clearwater Basin."

"Then we know where we stand. I'll be around, Cameron."

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Lee came down the stairs to the lobby Diamond Delaney stood beside the desk talking to the clerk. His ace gunman, Slinger, lounged against the door of the office, a cigarette hanging from a corner of his mouth. Delaney took one look at Lee and his countenance turned sober. On the way downstairs Lee had taken several bills from his money belt. He stopped before the hotel owner.

"Last night, Diamond," he said briefly, "I lost some money at your tables."

"Your I O U was good enough for me," Delaney said. "You know that, Trawick."

"I shouldn't have pulled the play I did, but the damned high tone of your bar irked me. Anyway, Cameron horned in and spoiled it. Here's the money for the I O U. I want you to get it for me."

"You want me to get it from Cameron?" Delaney repeated.

"If you do me the favor. I don't like to have anything to do with snakes."

Delaney took the money and pocketed it. He said succinctly, "Cameron is a big man, Trawick."

"In my book," Lee snapped, "a man is as big as he is honest. Cameron isn't big enough to throw a shadow."

Delaney said, "I'd hoped that you'd be staying around, Trawick."

"I am staying," Lee said. "I've taken a riding job with Jeff Mitchell."

"A riding job? You?"

"You're forgetting that I was a cowman before I was anything else."

Slinger chose that moment to break into the conversation. He leered and said, "Where's yore badge, Marshal? Looks like the man that put it on was big enough to take it off."

In three steps Lee was close to the gunman. He bunched Slinger's shirt front in his left hand and jerked the gunman to him. "I said once before I didn't like hired gun hands," Lee drawled. "I like 'em less all the time."

Deliberately he raised his right arm and with the heel of his hand ground Slinger's cigarette into his chin. Slinker ducked frenziedly and struck for his gun. Lee jerked the man forward again and smashed him full in the face. Slinger shot backward through the office door and a chair crashed as he took it to the floor with him.

Lee turned smoky eyes toward Delaney. The hotel owner shrugged and said impassively, "I warned him not to tangle with you. He would have done better if he'd listened to me."

Lee looked beyond Delaney and saw Linda standing in the door of the dining room. Don Lovelace stood behind her.

"Starting in to clean the town up, Lee?" Linda remarked, her eyes dark and brooding.

"I'm sorry you saw that, Linda," Lee said regretfully.

"I've seen it before," Linda said bitterly. "But there's one thing to be said for you, Lee. You believe in something enough to fight for it."

Don Lovelace looked sharply at the girl, his glance uncertain and wondering. Lee saw that look, and the intangible forces at play here gnawed at his mind.

"I gave Diamond the money to square my I O U with Cameron, Lovelace," Lee said. "I wanted you to know."

"Why me?" Lovelace asked.

"I don't know," Lee said shortly. "Maybe I didn't. I'll be going now."

"Where to, Lee?" Linda broke in. "You found the answers, didn't you? I can tell."

"Yes." Lee paused and regret ran deep within him. He repeated, "Yes."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Only time can answer that. Right now I'm going to work for Jeff Mitchell."

Lee lifted his hat and abruptly turned out into the street. Silence held for several seconds in the lobby after he'd gone, all looking after him. Linda was the first to speak.

"He'd die fighting for a whisky-soaked saloon bum against an army if he thought it was right," she said in a low voice. "He's the greatest man I've ever known."

Had Lee been fifteen minutes later in leaving town he would have seen the man mounted on the white horse ride in. But Lee left the hotel and went directly to the livery barn, paid his bill, threw a saddle on his horse and rode at a fast pace toward Clearwater Basin.

A quarter of an hour later Moccasin Nells rode his pure-white horse directly to the Black Rock Palace and dismounted. He was a slight man with a feline grace to his movements; he wore range garb except for beaded Indian moccasins in place of the customary half boots. There was a perpetual smile on Moccasin Nells's lips, but his eyes didn't smile.

Diamond Delaney turned away from patching up Slinger and grunted when he discovered Moccasin Nells standing in the door of his office. "Hello, Moccasin," the hotel man said. "Come on in."

Nells moved silently into the room, his eyes on Slinger's split, puffed lips. He chuckled and said, "Looks like somebody laid one on him."

"I'll kill him!" Slinger swore viciously. "I'll kill the dirty son——"

"Go cool off, Slinger," Diamond ordered. "And you'd better take

my advice this time. Don't tange with him—he's poison. Close the door as you go out."

When the gunman had gone Nells directed his smile toward Delaney. "I saw the well as I came in. There's money in oil. I spent some time in the fields down on the Coast."

"Yes," Diamond agreed, "there's money in it. There's also trouble. That's why I sent for you."

"You interested in the oil, Diamond?"

"No. But I've put everything I've got into the hunch that this town is a sure thing. I want you to protect my interests."

"Who smashed yore man?" Nells asked suddenly.

"Lee Trawick!"

"So-o-o." Nells's smile broadened. "I haven't seen Lee in three or four years."

"You wouldn't mind seeing him again?"

"I'd sort of like it. Lee's got a conscience and I'm not good for it."

"I always wondered what there was between you two." Delaney waited but a grin was the only answer to his invitation. He went on, "I'm putting you on the pay roll at two hundred a month, Moccasin."

"Where does Lee fit in?"

"I don't know yet. Nothing has broken so far but it's coming. Stuart Cameron is the man who's behind the oil. He's looking for a marshal who will take orders and not ask questions. The marshal will be in a spot to do himself some good. I can get him to appoint you."

"Me, a marshal? Nells laughed silently. "Why not? Sounds like a good thing for a smart man."

"It is. If Cameron gives you any orders carry 'em out. He's got around a dozen gun hands and he may want you to head the crew if something comes up. But remember this, Moccasin. I don't care what you make on the side but I brought you in here. You work for me. Is it a deal?"

"Sure." Moccasin grinned. "If I get any other offers I'll give you a chance to better 'em."

"Then it's settled." Diamond took a bottle and glasses out of a desk drawer. "We'll drink to it."

"Not me. It don't steady a man's hands," Moccasin Nells said.

CHAPTER X

LEE didn't overtake Jeff Mitchell and the other ranchers until they were dismounting at Jeff's Block J headquarters. It was Lee's first trip into the Basin, and from the time he had cleared the ridge his cowman instincts had responded to the best range he had ever seen.

Rocky Creek split the Basin, assuring plenty of water the year round.

On the far side of the Basin the terrain lifted steeply and up above was the mesa on which Frank Mulvey's Lazy M was situated. The one break in the perfect sides of the Basin was to the left of the sharp incline. There centuries of erosion had dug a deep, wide canyon along which Jeff had run a fence to prevent strays from falling over and plunging to death on the rocky floor below.

Lee rode up to the Block J ranch house as the ranchers were climbing out of the saddle. They all looked at him covertly, and Lee knew they had been discussing him along with the new complexity which had come to this range. Mulvey's face was sullen and defiant but the others were expressionless.

"Get down and come in, Trawick," Jeff said. "There are some things we want to talk over."

Lee followed the ranchers to the porch, and as they went up the steps the door opened and a girl came out. She spoke cordially to the men and Jeff said, "My daughter, Jean, Trawick. Lee Trawick, honey. He wants to hire on."

"He doesn't look like an ordinary cow hand." Jean smiled.

She impulsively extended her hand and Lee snatched off his hat and took it. The girl was vibrant with life; the clean wind off the sage was in her, and the sparkling sun and the summer rain. Jean laughed and withdrew her hand and Lee realized he had held it too long.

"Let's get down to business," Jeff said.

Jean sat on the top step as the men drew chairs or hunkered against the side of the house. Lee leaned against a post and waited.

"We did some talkin' as we rode out," Jeff said to Lee. "This oil business is kind of sudden." Briefly he told Jean what had happened in town, then turned back to Lee. "There's a lot we want to know."

"Meanin' first"—Lee's glance raked Mulvey's defiant face—"you're wonderin' about me."

"We don't know anything about you," Jeff said frankly. "Not that I'm forgettin' the favor you done me."

"Lafe Whittaker of Silver City told me to look you up if I ever came this way, Mr. Mitchell."

"Silver City!" Jeff's eyes narrowed. "I knew I'd heard yore name. You cleaned up—never mind. If Lafe Whittaker sends a man to me I don't ask any questions."

"I'm a cowman," Lee said. "I was coming to this country to buy range and was almost here before I heard about the oil."

"What about the oil, Trawick?" Jeff asked slowly.

"A lot of what Cameron said back there was true," Lee said quietly. "I don't like oil and you don't, but ranchers didn't like nesters and barbed wire and they came anyhow."

"We could run this oil crowd out!" Mulvey broke in hotly.

"Maybe," Lee said with a brief glance at him. "But other oilmen would follow and after them others. I'm not telling you what to do. I don't belong to this range——"

"You meant to," Jeff said.

Lee nodded. "What's more to the point, I'm a Westerner. Cameron's not and he don't care anything about the West. On top of that he's a cold-blooded snake. I'm not saying all oilmen are crooks. But I know Cameron is and he's right on your doorstep. The oil's here and it's going to be got out. The only way to keep it honest and use it for the good of the West is for men like you to handle it, Mr. Mitchell!"

"You mean," Jeff asked in amazement, "you think I ought to go into the oil business?"

"There's oil on your land," Lee said. "You could sink a well or make arrangements for it to be done under you. Anyway, you ought to control everything about it to keep the crooks out and see that everybody gets a square deal."

"I think he's right," Jean exclaimed excitedly.

"This will take some thinkin' over," Jeff said slowly. "Hell, I'm a cowman. There's a lot in what you say, Lee; but I got to think about it."

Mulvey broke in resentfully, "Looks to me like we could settle the troubles of our range ourselves without an outsider hornin' in——"

"Rein in, Frank!" Jeff said sharply. "When you get as old as I am maybe you can judge a man." He turned back to Lee and said courteously, "I hope you will be my guest for a few days, Lee."

"I thought I hired on——"

"Hell, I can get plenty of cow pokes." Jeff snorted. "I'll want a few days to think this thing over. If I go into it you're goin' with me."

"It wasn't in my mind——"

"I don't care what was in yore mind. It's yore idea and you'll have to back it."

"Well, we'll talk about that later," Lee said slowly. "But there's more to this than what's been said. Cameron is out to get the Basin. He won't stop at anything and he's going to be hard to handle. First you'd better do something about water for your cows, Mr. Mitchell. Cameron will see to it that the creek stays fouled."

"I don't like to let a man get away with shoving me off my water," Jeff growled

"The only thing you can do is fight. In the long run that won't gain you anything if there's another way."

"Well, I can make arrangements until I decide what to do," Jeff said grudgingly. He turned to Mulvey, "Frank, you've got range to

spare. I'll lease what I need from you for the time being. Yore west pasturage is clear."

"I mean to throw some stuff in there," Mulvey said ungraciously, but he squirmed under the old cowman's sharp glance and added, "You can have what you want on the east side."

"That borders the canyon," Jeff muttered, "and the trail up runs right along it. It's risky but all right. I'll have to have some of the boys stay with my stuff all the time anyhow, so the strain won't get mixed. I'll gather tomorrow and drive 'em up."

"Do it today—now," Lee advised.

"Hell, it would be away after dark before the gather would be finished, easy as a gather is in the Basin. I'd have to drive to Frank's pasture during the night and the canyon's right alongside the trail."

"I'd risk it," Lee said. "You ought to have your stuff out of the way before—anything happens."

"Yore old men could make that drive blindfolded, Jeff," Mulvey said.

"I reckon," Jeff said thoughtfully. He looked at Lee. "You think Cameron is likely to start mischief?"

"Just any time."

"Well, you know him. All right, I'll put my boys after the stuff. Any of you men got anything to say about this whole business?"

None of the ranchers had, for they felt Jeff was principally concerned and they had long followed his leadership. They offered to help gather the cattle but Jeff thanked them and said they weren't needed. Except for Mulvey, they rode off toward their various spreads, and Jeff prepared to get his men together for the work.

"I'd like to help gather," Lee said. "It's been a long time since I worked cows."

"Then come in and I'll show you your room," Jean said.

"Why, I'll stay at the bunk——"

"You'll not," Jean contradicted. "And if you'll wait till I change I'll ride out with you. My horse needs a run."

Lee was pleased at the prospect of her company but he happened just then to glance at Frank Mulvey. The young ranchers resentment since they'd first met had flared into naked hate. Lee could see no reason for it and hoped it wouldn't be permanent.

Jean, too, noticed the look on Mulvey's face and said, "Won't you ride with us, Frank? You'll be staying for supper, won't you?"

"Not this time," Mulvey said shortly. "I've got to go back to town. I forgot to place an order for supplies."

"You stopped by the store," Jeff said in surprise.

"I forgot some things," Mulvey repeated stubbornly. "I'll be ridin'."

CHAPTER XI

MULVEY rode his horse at a cruel pace toward Black Rock. He was in a black mood and all his gathering temper seemed to center around Lee Trawick.

Things hadn't been going very well on Frank's Lazy M since his father died. The old man had been overly indulgent toward an only son with the result that Frank was willful and spiteful. He hadn't any great stability of character and the fact that other men didn't indulge him as his father had done was a constant canker in his mind—he was always feeling persecuted. He didn't handle his business affairs well, and gambling at the county seat had plunged him into debt.

Frank had long been paying court to Jean Mitchell. He was as much in love with her as it was possible for his self-centered nature to be with anybody, but he never lost sight of the fact that she would inherit the Basin and that if he married her he could recoup his fortunes. He hadn't liked her hospitality to Lee. It had been nothing more than that, but to Frank's resentful mind it already seemed that she had gone beyond mere hospitality.

Lee had unknowingly thwarted Frank several times. A gambler at the county seat was pressing Frank hard for money and he was becoming desperate. If Lee hadn't interfered Jeff Mitchell would have moved out of the Basin and left Black Rock's beef market almost entirely to Frank. So Frank hated Lee as the sum of all his troubles, but at the last Lee had played into the young rancher's hands when he had suggested that the cattle be moved that night. It had occurred to Frank then how he could probably get Jeff Mitchell out of the Basin, strike a blow at Lee and make a little ready cash on the side. That it meant ruining Jeff Mitchell didn't arouse the slightest compunction in Frank.

Some time later Frank knocked on the door of Stuart Cameron's room at the Palace and went in. Cameron looked up questioningly; then he recognized Frank as one of the ranchers he had earlier talked to and his face darkened. "I haven't anything more to say to you," Cameron said coldly. "The old man stated your case. Get out. I'm busy."

"The old man stated *his* case. I think you'd better listen to mine," Frank said insolently. He crossed the floor and sat down. "I need money. Five hundred will do for a starter. Maybe there'll be other payments later."

"So that's it," Cameron grunted.

"I can tell you how to push Jeff Mitchell to the wall so he'll have to sell the Basin. He probably wouldn't sell it to you but he would

to me and I might act as your agent. But that's another deal. The first thing is to break him."

Cameron took a cigar, extended the box toward Frank and said, "Go on. I'm listening."

"Well, it's like this. It will mean considerable to me if this town grows and I'm the biggest rancher around. With Jeff gone I'll be the biggest. Jeff can't have much money banked. He's got a good spread, but he's been goin' in for purebreds the last few years and ain't sold any stuff since he started buildin' his herd. It's been all outgo with nothin' comin' in, so he can't have much ready cash."

"All right, his assets are tied up in his cattle. What follows?"

Frank talked for half an hour and when he left the Palace he had two hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket with a promise for a like amount the next day if the plan he had presented worked out. He paused outside and saw a smiling man climb aboard a solidly white horse and head him toward the livery barn. Frank didn't know the man, but he was wearing the marshal's badge and he had on moccasins. Frank got on his own horse and headed back for the Basin. He had decided that later it might look better if he had had supper at the Block J and stayed around a while.

The gather at the Block J had moved forward rapidly. The work was finished by eight o'clock and, leaving two men to hold the herd, the crew rode in for a late supper.

There they found Frank Mulvey waiting, passing the time in aimless conversation with the cook. Jeff and Jean on this occasion ate with the men in the cook-shack, and it was a good-natured, bantering crowd that sat at the long table and fell to.

Jeff had told his men something of the trouble that threatened and had introduced Lee around. The hands accepted Lee at face value without knowing just what his position was. It hadn't taken them long, however, to discover that he was a top hand. For his part Lee found the crew, from grizzled veteran to the last man taken on, the most contented outfit he had ever seen—a remarkable tribute to Jeff Mitchell. As for Jean, any man in the crew would have happily died for her. Lee was certain that if trouble came to the Basin it would find the Block J men loyal to the core and eager to fight their boss's battles.

After supper the men prepared to ride out again. Lee said to Jeff, "I wouldn't leave the buildings unguarded, Mr. Mitchell. Why don't you take a couple of men and stay here? It'll take a good part of the night to shove that stuff up on the mesa."

"Hell, I'm goin' along," Jeff snorted. "I want to see that everything goes all right."

"Then I'm going too," Jean said.

"You're not!" Jeff snapped. "You're goin' to stay right here."

"The place ought not to be left unguarded," Lee put in again. "I don't expect anything to happen but it might."

"Well, all right," Jeff growled, "I'll stay." He looked at his gray-haired foreman and said, "Mose, take care of them cows."

"Don't worry about 'em, Jeff," the foreman answered. "I'll send the two boys in that are holdin' the herd. After they've et keep 'em here. I won't need 'em."

"All right. You goin' or stayin', Lee?"

"I think I'll go," Lee said. "It's good to be around cows again."

"Suit yourself. Too bad the trail to yore house is further over, Frank. You'd have company."

"If you and Jean are goin' to be home I'll stay and visit awhile," Frank said.

It was close to ten o'clock when Mose and the crew started the herd up the steep trail to the mesa. The herd was larger than Jeff had led Lee to believe and was the finest bunch of cattle Lee had ever seen.

A thin moon settled in the west, giving just enough light to knock the edge off of complete darkness. As Lee climbed steadily with cattle lumbering before and after him he felt a heady peace stealing over him. But Lee knew that the menace of violence hung over the Basin just as the canyon to his left offered a menace to the moving herd. The trail ran close to the rim of the canyon and its depths were unfathomable and sinister.

Lee was midway of the climb with men and cattle strung from top to bottom of the trail when it happened. A crash of gunfire rolled across the Basin from the direction of the Block J ranch house, echoed off the far canyon wall and re-echoed.

Lee jumped his horse out of the line of cattle at the sound of that first volley, his muscles tight and nerves straining. Oddly, his first thought was of Jean. The firing continued, broken now into separate staccato barks. The cattle came to a halt as up and down the line men pulled up and shouted queries passed from mouth to mouth. From up ahead Mose bellowed to the men to hold their positions as he turned out of the trail and came recklessly clattering down to Lee.

"What do you think, Trawick?" Mose shouted as he rode up.

"Cameron's men have jumped the house," Lee said briefly. "We'd better ride for it."

"Damn it, I can't leave these cows hangin' on the side of this canyon!" Mose expostulated. "Jeff would have a fit!"

"Jeff might die if he doesn't get help in a hurry. The cows are headed right. You point them onto the mesa and I'll leave one man at the bottom to keep them moving. Send down the men from up above. I'll pick up the others and ride in."

Before he finished speaking Lee was kicking his horse down the trail.

Behind him he heard Mose going back up, ordering the men to turn back and follow Lee. As he went down Lee called to the men he passed, and when he rode past the drag he shouted to the puncher there to keep to his job.

Lee hit the floor of the Basin and lifted his horse to a hard run. Six or eight punchers were strung out behind him, and those who had been higher up were still pounding down the trail. The firing at the ranch house continued but it seemed to Lee that it was drawing away. When he was a quarter of a mile from the house the firing stopped altogether. When he got close enough Lee shouted to the house. He whirled into the yard with Block J men crowding him hard but there was no sign of anyone about.

The door of the house slammed back and Jeff apeared on the porch with a smoking gun in his hand. Frank Mulvey was beside him, also with his guns drawn, and Jean had a rifle across her arm.

"You're too late, boys!" Jeff shouted exultantly. "They jumped us but we drove 'em off."

"How many were there?" Lee asked sharply.

"I don't know," Jeff answered. "First thing we knew a swarm of lead hit the side of the house. But we poured it back to 'em and they didn't stick it out long. Didn't look like they wanted to fight."

"Good God!" Lee groaned. He spun his horse and yelled to the men, "The herd! Ride, damn it, like you never rode before!"

They didn't make it. They had barely got started when guns began to roar from the top of the mesa trail to the bottom. Tiny specks of fire licked out in the darkness. Then cows began to bawl until the night was hideous with their crying. And far to the west sounded the rhythmic roll of a body of fast-ridden horses.

Not until dawn was the full horror of what had taken place on the trail revealed. They had found the young puncher who was riding drag. He was dead. Mose had been shot three times but was still alive. They had taken him to the ranch house, stopped the flow of blood and sent a rider to the county seat for the doctor. And then dawn revealed that whole herd of purebreds piled up in the bottom of the canyon. Mounted men with roaring guns had sprung at them at intervals all along the trail and driven them over the lip of the canyon to the rock-studded floor far below. Forty or fifty of the last to go over had lived, but Block J men had to go down and end their suffering to the last one.

Not long after dawn Lee roped a fresh horse out of the corral and threw his saddle on him. Lee's face was gray in the early light, his lips compressed. He blamed himself for the whole thing. If he hadn't butted in Jeff would have got a good price for his land and still have his magnificent herd. And on top of that Lee had been taken in by a ruse which he thought he should have seen through.

As he cinched the saddle Jean, Jeff and Frank Mulvey, who hadn't gone home, came out of the house. Jeff wasn't even angry yet. The catastrophe had left him dazed and numb. It hurt Lee to look at him.

"There's breakfast for you inside, Lee," Jean said quietly, unconsciously calling him by his first name.

"Thanks," Lee said in a flat voice, "I'm not hungry."

"Where are you goin'?" Frank asked curiously.

"To Black Rock."

"No, Lee," Jean cried. "You can't prove it was Cameron."

"No," Lee said, "I can't. But maybe I can get proof. Mose couldn't talk much and he couldn't see the men that jumped him. But one thing he did see. The leader of those killers rode a white horse. There aren't many of those about. I mean to see who in Black Rock rides a white horse."

CHAPTER XII

LEE was halfway to Black Rock when Frank Mulvey overtook him. Frank pulled his horse down and said, "I thought I'd ride in with you."

"Why?" Lee asked flatly without looking around.

"Why——well, hell," Frank said uncertainly, "the Mitchells are friends of mine."

Lee didn't speak again. When they rode through the gap in the ridge made by Rocky Creek the sun was well up and Black Rock was seething with activity. The crew under the Irish foreman was striving to conquer the gusher and cap it.

Close to the gusher two other crews were working, spudding the ground for two more wells. All the laborers were Polacks, and from the amount of work done it was obvious they had worked all night.

In addition to the activity around the well a long procession of wagons was just pulling into town. There were around twenty wagons and they were piled high with barrels which had been pyramided to a surprising height and lashed securely into place. The time had almost come for oil to start moving out of Black Rock.

The scene before him made no conscious impression on Lee. Later he would take it all in but at the moment he had a job to do.

"How you goin' about this?" Frank asked curiously.

Lee made no answer and rode straight to the livery barn. He swung down and went inside. An old-timer who looked like a prospector came to meet him, but Lee ignored the man and started walking the length of the stalls. He hadn't far to look. In the fifth or sixth stall he found a beautiful white horse munching grain. His coat glistened, indicating

that his owner either took extremely good care of him or paid to have it done. Just to be sure, Lee looked into the rest of the stalls and out into the corral. Then he came back, his face set into harsh lines, and stopped before the curious old-timer.

"Who owns the white horse?" Lee drawled.

"Oh, him? He b'longs to the marshal. A beauty, ain't he?"

"Who is the marshal?"

"A smilin' little gent. Least he looks like he's smilin'—I ain't shore," the old-timer expounded. "I don't know his name. I'm just keepin' the place while the gent that owns it gets his breakfast."

Lee pushed by the old prospector and headed for the door, where Frank was leaning against a post watching him. Lee said nothing as he passed and headed for the Black Rock Palace. Frank walked along after him but stayed at a discreet distance when Lee looked into the bar and lobby and at last headed for the dining room.

The guests of the Black Rock Palace were having breakfast. Stuart Cameron sat at a table with three prosperous-looking men and others were scattered over the room. Conversation made a steady din in the room.

As Lee entered the door he met Linda Delaney. A smile touched her lips and she said, "Lee——"

"Not now, Linda," he said gently. "I'm glad you are going. I'll see you soon."

She looked at him sharply and understood. "Lee, listen to me——"

"Please, Linda. Go on."

Her expression turned wistful and she bowed her head and walked through the door. The other occupants of the room were so enthralled in their talk of oil they didn't immediately notice Lee's entrance. His glance rested briefly on Stuart Cameron and noted that Diamond Delaney sat with his gambler, Don Lovelace, at the next table. Besides those there was only one other occupant of the room; a cowman by his dress, but his back was to Lee and he seemed completely out of all that was going on.

Lee walked into the room. The conversation dropped several keys as one man after another saw his face and finally stopped altogether. Lee halted just short of the space between Stuart Cameron's table and Diamond Delaney's. Cameron surveyed him coolly and, as he casually lighted a cigar, his eyes seemed scornfully amused. Lee turned slightly to stare at Delaney and the hotel man met his eyes steadily but without expression.

"Who in Black Rock," Lee asked slowly, "rides a white horse?"

"Are you addressing me?" Cameron said sarcastically.

"Last night a crew of hard cases drove Jeff Mitchell's prize herd over a cliff. They killed one man and shot up another. They were led

by a man on a white horse. I've sure got business with that man."

"Afraid I can't help you," Delaney said. "I don't go out much during the day——"

"Well, there's another way," Lee broke in, and the menace in his voice was deadly. "Who is the new marshal?"

"Hello, Lee."

The voice came from behind him, and as he slowly turned Lee noticed that the chair where the man in range garb had been sitting was vacant. He hadn't made the slightest sound when he moved. Lee completed his turn and faced Moccasin Nells. No surprise showed in Lee's face but the breath slowly gusted from his lungs and his shoulders drooped slightly.

"So it's you, Moccasin."

"That's right." Moccasin smiled but his eyes were pale and humorless. "Haven't seen you in several years, Lee."

"No." Lee stared a long moment into the other's eyes, then dropped his glance to the badge on his vest. Almost to himself he said, "I might have known. I couldn't but I might have guessed. With everywhere else to go you had to come here."

"I like this town," Moccasin said. "I aim to stay awhile. Were you looking for the new marshal, Lee?"

The question was a challenge, bald and blunt. Moccasin stood smilingly at ease, but every muscle was coiled taut. The onlookers felt that time was suspended and it was difficult to breathe. Lee merely continued to stare while the tension built until it was unbearable.

Moccasin's smile widened and almost became real. "There was something else too. You were lookin' for a man who rode a white horse. I ride one and I ain't noticed any others in town."

Slowly then Lee moved. He walked past Moccasin Nells and headed for the door, his shoulders slumped as though with infinite weariness. As he passed through the opening he didn't notice Frank Mulvey's sneer of hateful triumph, and he was deaf to the sound within the room itself, the sound of chorused laughter.

Lee went back to the livery where he'd left his horse and climbed into the saddle. He rode out of town on a back street. Later there were those who said he sneaked out of town like a whipped coyote.

At the time Lee felt whipped though not. as everyone supposed, from fear of Moccasin Nells's guns. Lee would have welcomed the opportunity to let the issue between them be settled with guns. But Lee couldn't let that happen. Moccasin was Lee's half brother.

Lee had been very young when his father died, and his mother, left alone, had married again. That marriage had been a tragedy, for Lee's stepfather had turned out to be a vicious, brutal man. Fortunately he hadn't lived long, but Moccasin was the result of that union and, even

in boyhood, it was evident that he had inherited the worse traits of his father.

As long as his mother lived Lee had put up with his half brother, had even tried to steer him right until he realized that Nells was thoroughly bad. When their mother died the two had drifted their separate ways.

Twice in the years that followed their trails had crossed. The first time Lee was ranching and Moccasin, on the dodge for killing a man, had come to the ranch to hide out. Lee had taken him in for the sake of his mother's memory and had made one more effort to straighten Moccasin out. Mocking laughter had been his reward.

The second time Moccasin showed up Lee was gun marshal of a tough town, hired by the better element to clean it up. Moccasin had ridden in by accident, but when he saw the situation he stayed. He had tentatively aligned himself with the crooks to see what Lee would do. Lee had ordered Moccasin to ride on but had given no indication that he would back the order with force, and when Moccasin defied him Lee did nothing. It was then the cunning brain of Moccasin's had grasped the fact that Lee couldn't bring himself to risk the possibility of killing his half brother. It was a situation built to order for a man of Moccasin's inherent viciousness. He taunted Lee, openly flaunted the law in his face, dared him to pull his gun. In the end it had been Lee who had ridden on because he couldn't do justice to the job for which he had been hired.

It was not Lee's way to talk, and no one knew of the relationship between him and Moccasin. Lee had ridden on to other towns, hoping that Moccasin wouldn't show up again. He hadn't until now.

Where the buildings stopped the back street ended, and Lee cut across lots rank with weeds to reach the trail that led to the Basin. His horse shied and Lee pulled him to a stop. Before him, almost covered by the weeds, was the gaunt figure of old Luke stretched at full length, his long beard crusted with dried blood. For a long time Lee sat looking down. Finally he nodded. "Sure. Moccasin wouldn't mind killing an old man. He likes to kill."

Slowly then Lee climbed out of the saddle and bent over the old man—and he saw Luke's chest rise gently. Swiftly he lifted Luke and found that he hadn't been shot but had received a vicious blow along the side of his head. The wound was open and angry looking, but the old prospector was far from dead. Lee lifted him to the saddle, got up behind him and headed on toward the Basin.

As he rode up to the Block J Lee noticed the hands congregated before the bunkhouse, and at that moment Frank Mulvey rode away from the corral, headed toward his own spread.

Lee pulled up and said, "Somebody give me a hand, will you?"

Blank silence met the request and not a man moved. Lee lifted his head and slowly looked the men over. Their faces were grimly set and their eyes angrily accusing. Without saying anything further Lee slid to the ground, let Luke down over his shoulder and carried the old man into the bunkhouse. The men parted to let him through, maintaining their tight-lipped silence.

But Lee had scarcely laid Luke on a bunk when there came the sound of running feet and Jean burst through the door. "Lee," she cried, "who's hurt?"

"It's an old prospector——"

"Why, it's Luke!"

"You know him then?"

"Of course. He's been dropping in on us for years. He and Dad like to talk over the old days. Who would have hurt such a harmless old man?"

"Probably the new mar——" Lee broke off and finished, "I found him like that on the edge of town."

Jean lifted her eyes and Lee saw that she, too, knew. But her look didn't condemn him. Lee was deeply grateful and wished he could talk to this girl but there was nothing to say.

Jean turned swiftly to Luke, dropped to her knees beside him. "Get some water, Lee. And there are bandages and disinfectant in that cabinet up front. Dad always sees to that."

Competently she cleansed the wound, applied the germicide and deftly handled the bandages. Lee handed her things.

"Luke has become something of a legend through this country," she chatted. "A lot of people think he's queer but he isn't. He just prefers to live alone."

"How has he lived?" Lee asked mechanically.

"Oh, he manages to scrape out enough gold dust to supply his needs. From the old mine shafts, I suppose. Somebody spread the story that he has a lot of gold hidden somewhere, but that's just talk. Still a lot of people believe it."

"I keep forgetting Black Rock was a mining town," Lee said. "I haven't seen any shafts."

"They're all caved in but the big shaft. It's high on the hill behind town. The Dover Mining Company sank it. The Dover had big money behind it and for a while took out a lot of gold until the vein pinched out. I was not very old but I can remember how terrible it was when the vein ended. The Dover geologist had the theory that the pocket where Black Rock is had sunk and that if they'd backtrack and go down they could pick up the vein again. The Dover people ran a shaft under the town all the way to the ridge and any number of smaller shafts off the main one. They went broke hunting for the lost vein

and that was the end of Black Rock. The entrance to the big shaft was closed, and I suppose most of it has caved and filled in long ago. There now, Luke."

She looked up at Lee and smiled. "He's going to be all right. We'll keep him here with us so there's no use for you to look so worried."

"This is just part of it," Lee said heavily. "I'll be saying good-bye in a few minutes. I'm riding on."

"No!" she cried. Luke groaned and Jean turned and pretended to make him comfortable while a worried frown puckered her forehead.

"It's all right, Luke," Jean said. "Lee found you and brought you here."

Luke's glance shifted to Lee who nodded. "You aren't hurt bad, old-timer. You'll be up and around in no time."

"What for?" Luke moaned. "They got my store buildin', I reckon."

"I reckon."

"Little gent I never seen afore walked in," Luke muttered. "Said he was hungry and I ain't never turned a man away yet. He was new in town so I didn't figger him for one of the oil crowd and got careless. Then he pulled the marshal's badge out of his pocket and told me to git out. I jumped fer my gun and he slammed me with his 'n." The old man lifted his eyes pleadingly to Lee. "But we'll git my place back, won't we, son? You and me."

"Hush, Luke," Jean said. "You must rest now."

"He sided me once already." Luke chuckled. "Oughta see him pull a gun. The marshall ain't slow but my money'd be on this younker here. You'll help me, won't you, son?"

"I reckon not, Luke," Lee said bitterly. "I'm pushing on right soon."

Lee looked away from the misery in the old man's eyes and again Jean said, "Get some rest now, Luke. I'll bring you some broth soon. Lee, let's go out so he can sleep."

Lee followed her to the door and they stopped outside. The crew stiffened, looked apologetically at Jean and walked away. She appeared not to notice and looked far into the heat haze that rimmed the Basin. At last she faced Lee sqaurely.

"You can't ride on, Lee," she said.

"I can't do anything else," he answered.

"Yesterday," Jean went on in a low voice, "you said that oil ought to be kept in the hands of men like my father, ought to be kept honest and used for the West. What you said was true. You're one of the men like my father, Lee. Like he was a few years ago when he was younger. Don't you still believe what you said?"

"Yes."

"Then you can't leave. Want to talk about it?"

"No."

"All right." She nodded understandingly.

The door of the house slammed and old Jeff Mitchell came out onto the porch. He walked listlessly and after standing awhile sank into a chair to sit staring off across the Basin with unseeing eyes.

"How is he?" Lee asked.

"It's going hard with him. Oh, if he would just rant and curse and want to get his gun and go after somebody! But losing that herd seems to have knocked the fight out of him. He's like a man dazed by an awful shock."

"What about your foreman?" Lee asked.

"The doctor says he'll get well. But it will take time." She looked up at him quickly and her next words came in a rush. "Don't you see, Lee, you can't leave! With Dad like he is and Mose shot up I—we need you."

Lee stirred and looked at the toe of a boot. What she said put a new complexion on things. And she was right. He had brought on their troubles; he couldn't very well ride on and leave them saddled with what he was responsible for. He hadn't thought of it that way before, but that was right.

He said simply, "I'll stay."

"Oh, I'm so glad." She smiled and her whole face lighted. "I'll go fix something for Luke now."

Lee stood a long while after she had gone, probing his thoughts and trying to see the end of what lay ahead. Finally he shifted his shoulders restlessly and turned back into the bunkhouse. As soon as he passed through the door he stopped short and muttered an exclamation under his breath.

Old Luke was gone!

CHAPTER XIII

LEE tried all afternoon to find the old prospector but had no luck. Luke had gone out a rear window and where he had gone there was no way to know. Lee got his horse and scoured the Basin, but Luke had disappeared and had left no sign of his going.

For a week life at the Block J was at a standstill. There were no cattle to work so the hands idled about restlessly. Some of the younger hands wanted to go after the marshal of Black Rock. Frank Mulvey had told them Lee had identified the marshal as the one who had led the raid on the stock before he'd welched on the showdown. But older heads cautioned the more impulsive ones to wait. The marshal was in it all right but there might be others higher up and Jeff wouldn't like

it if his men spoiled bigger game. He would give the right orders as soon as he snapped out of it.

Lee stayed away from the men. He understood how they felt about him and didn't blame them. He spent most of the time riding aimlessly around the Basin. It was a strained, weary week on the Block J that drove everyone's temper to a ragged edge.

There was no lack of life or activity in Black Rock during that week, however. By noon of the first day—the day on which Lee faced Moccasin Nells in the dining room of the Palace—the crew got the gusher capped. It was simple then to rig the pipe lines and, with gas pressure furnishing the power, to begin to fill the barrels the freight outfit had brought in. Barrel after barrel was filled with the liquid gold, but along about the middle of the afternoon the spurting stream of oil from the well began to diminish and lose its power. Slower and slower it ran until finally it stopped altogether.

Stuart Cameron and his geologist, Rawlings, were summoned by the Irish foreman to confirm his opinion.

"What's happened is natural enough and to be expected," Rawlings said. "The natural gas has escaped to such an extent that it no longer supplies pressure enough to make the oil flow. But that has nothing to do with the presence of oil itself. From now on you will simply have to pump."

"All of which I figgered," the foreman grunted. "Hey, you bloody devils, clear them barrels and get ready to rig the pump."

The rest of the afteroon the crew worked at top speed. At dark another took its place under the driving tongue of the foreman, and by midnight the walking beam of the pumping rig swung in steady rhythm to the pop of the donkey engine's exhaust and oil was flowing again in a steady stream.

And the next day oil began to move. At daybreak the first great double-action wagon with its six-mule team pulled into place beside the derrick and gray-faced, sweating Polacks heaved heavy barrels of oil to the wagon bed. This wagon was followed by another.

All that day the great wagons, with their swearing, whip-snapping drivers, moved in and out of Black Rock in a steady procession. The road through the spur of low mountains behind the town was narrow and twisting and dangerous enough, but the way through was short.

Once through the spur of hills the rest of the trip to the river was simplicity itself and the wagons were capable of making good time At the river landing a half-dozen barges, piled with empty barrels, were tied up. That first day one of the barges took on half a capacity load, and when the filled barrels were transferred to the barge empty ones were stacked on the wagon in order to keep an undiminished supply at the well.

Stuart Cameron was satisfied with the way things were going and was confident of the future. Aside from the money the actual sale of the oil would bring in, his stock would skyrocket.

And Cameron had no doubt that he would get the Basin without much difficulty. Frank Mulvey had dropped by for the balance of his money. With a contemptuous smile on his face Cameron had paid. Frank had told him how the blow had apparently broken Jeff Mitchell and how it would be only a matter of time before the Basin would be for sale.

Cameron's biggest worry—Lee Trawick—had also been removed. Cameron had, too late, recognized Lee as an adversary who would be extremely hard to handle, but that was before Lee's meeting with Moccasin Nells. Now if Lee proved difficult, which Cameron had reason to doubt, he would turn the new marshal loose on him.

The world looked good to Stuart Cameron and the future was a vista of wealth and power. That was on the first day that oil began moving out of Black Rock. The next day things changed.

CHAPTER XIV

CAMERON was awakened early by a hammering on his door and viciously cursed the disturbance. Nevertheless, he donned a silk dressing gown and answered the door to find a laborer standing before it.

"Well?" Cameron asked curtly. "Your excuse for kicking my door in at this hour of the night had better be a good one."

"Sorry, Mr. Cameron," the man said humbly. "The boss sent for you to come to the well. Ain't no oil comin' out of it."

"What?"

"No sir. The pump was shut down from midnight to dawn like you said so the wagons could catch up with the barrels we had filled. And, when the pump was started a little while ago wouldn't nothin' but a little trickle of oil come."

"Get Rawlings," Cameron snapped, "and tell him to get down to the well. I'll be right along."

The speed with which Cameron dressed and walked to the well was an indication of how serious the news had appeared to him to be.

The crew foreman came out to meet Cameron, his face screwed into a puzzled frown.

"What's this foolishness I hear about the well not producing?" Cameron asked curtly. Where's that damned geologist who——"

"Here I am, Mr. Cameron," Rawlings said, striding up.

"And about time," Cameron snapped. "You've heard?"

"Yes," Rawlings answered worriedly. "But I'm sure the answer is in the rig."

"Nothin's wrong with the rig," the foreman said belligerently.

"Well, there's oil here," Rawlings protested.

"There'd better be," Cameron snapped. "What do you propose to do?"

"I brought my instruments," the geologist said. "I'll recheck my findings if you say so."

"Get on with it."

For several hours Rawlings worked feverishly under the harrowing scrutiny of Cameron, who sent to the Palace for a pot of coffee and food so he wouldn't have to leave the well. At last the geologist finished and turned to Cameron.

"My original report to you was correct," Rawlings said with relief. "There's oil here—in the quantity I told you."

"Then the fault is mechanical!" Cameron blazed at the crew foreman.

"I'm sayin' it ain't so." The foreman bristled. "But I'll pull the whole rig so you can see with your own eyes."

"Get at it," Cameron said harshly. "And God help your Irish soul if you're responsible for holding up so many men at my expense!"

When the pumping apparatus was cleared from the shaft Rawlings turned triumphantly to Cameron and said, "That proves I was right. The ends of the tools are wet with pure oil."

Cameron acknowledged the undeniable evidence and turned his baleful glare on the foreman. He snapped one word, "Well?"

"There's somethin' funny about this." The Irishman scowled. "I checked every inch of the rig as she came out and you saw me do it. There's nothing wrong with the pump."

"There may be some fault at the bottom of the well," Rawlings suggested. "I think you'd better bail to be sure."

Cameron fumed with impatience as the afternoon wore on while the bailing apparatus was set up. When everything was ready two men manned the windlass and slowly pulled the receptacle attached to the cable from the bottom of the well.

The bailing bucket was full of pure oil!

"That settles it!" Cameron raged at his foreman. "The oil is there ready, and if you can't get it out I'll hire somebody who can."

Puzzled and scowling, the foreman carefully went over his pumping apparatus again, shook his head and gave orders to lower it again into the well. It was getting dark when everything was set for another try. It failed; no oil came out. At least the trickle was so thin that it would take hours to fill a single barrel.

Cameron's badly strained patience snapped then. In a voice low

with fury he turned on the foreman and said, "You're an incompetent, worthless, stupid fool. Get off my property. I've no place for a lying lout!"

"I'm a liar, am I?" The Irishman sprang forward, his great fists balled.

But suddenly at Cameron's side appeared the slight form of Moccasin Nells. "Easy, feller," Moccasin said softly, a thin smile on his lips.

The foreman came to a stop, a helpless, raging giant.

"You heard Mr. Cameron," Moccasin said goadingly. "Get goin'. And if you hang around town keep yore nose clean or you'll be seein' me again."

It took Cameron three days to get another foreman from the coast. The delay was costing him a tremendous amount of money, and his temper wore thinner than his finances. His laborers had to be paid; his crew of gunmen were a steady drain; and the freight outfit would soon become a terrific burden, lying idle as it was with no work to do.

All of Black Rock was caught in the fever of impatience and strained excitement. The saloons did a roaring business and the nights were filled with wild brawls. Marshal Nells made no effort to keep order in the town so long as no one stepped on his toes. Two, a miner and a teamster, made that mistake. Moccasin killed them both.

The miner had no friends so there was no one to complain that he tackled Moccasin's guns with nothing but a barroom chair. The teamster had a gun all right so there was nothing that could be done about him either, but he did have friends who could hate. From the owner of the freight outfit down to the most obscure teamster the freighters formed an undying hatred for the marshal. But word spread that Moccasin's draw on the occasion of those two fights was the fastest ever seen and no one cared to buck his guns.

Cameron took his edgy temper out on the gangs sinking the new wells. The donkey engine coughed twenty-four hours a day, and rotating crews put in twelve hours' work apiece. Drillers had supervised the construction of derricks, and drilling tools took over where the spudding left off. With the unceasing grind the wells went down with amazing rapidity.

The new foreman, an exceptionally able man bribed away from a producing company by promise of an exorbitant salary, arrived and set to work on the number-one well. For two days he worked but he couldn't bring up any oil.

It was shortly after noon when, completely baffled, he reported to Cameron. "I don't understand it," he said. "There's oil there and the outfit's all right. But I can't get oil to the surface. There must be an obstruction at the bottom of the well even if bailing does show pure oil.

I think we'd better bail for several days and then if necessary shoot off another nitro shell."

Because there was nothing else to do Cameron gave his consent and the new foreman left. Cameron, angry that man or nature should cross his purpose, was striding up and down the length of his room when the door jerked open and the owner of the freight outfit strode in. He was a burly, hardened man who wore rough clothes and rarely bothered to shave. He gave no favors and asked none, but in his way he was square.

"What do you want?" Cameron asked coldly.

"What do I want? I been here a week and you ain't arranged to see me at my office to pay for them barrels or the cost of me movin' here like you agreed. Today a week's up and pay is due my men. But you ain't arranged to pay me what I got comin' at the end of every week."

"I might point out——"

"To hell with that. I can't help it if yore well ain't comin' through. You guaranteed me the figger we agreed on every week."

"You'll get your damned money," Cameron grated. "Now get out and don't come here again."

"All right, mister. Pay up and I won't need to come here. I want all it cost me to move and I mean to have it before another wagon rolls. And if you don't kick through me and my boys will carry out a hell of a lot of oil machinery when we leave here."

With that the burly freighter left and Cameron's lips drew into a thin line.

"If I owned the Basin I could borrow any amount of money," he said aloud, "and it wouldn't be necessary to borrow much. That damned well shutting off has got me in this hole. What in the name of God could have caused it?"

CHAPTER XV

LEE was at the corral when Stuart Cameron's emissary, one of the Palace financiers, arrived at the Block J to make old Jeff another offer for the Basin. The first Lee knew of what was going on was when he heard Jeff roar like an angry bull from the front porch. Lee set off for the porch on the run and turned the corner of the house just as the white-faced caller was hastily climbing back into the rig he had hired from the livery stable. Jeff stood on the top step, Jean behind him, and the old rancher was still bellowing.

"Sell the Basin?" Jeff shouted. "And to a low-down, stinkin' polecat like Cameron? You tell that spawn of Satan I wouldn't sell him a saddle-backed maverick if he was starvin'. Tell him I know it was him

tried to ruin me and he ain't near seen the end of me yet. I ought to gun you for associatin' with him."

The rig took off in a shower of gravel, and after it had gone Jeff continued to stomp up and down the porch, swearing and ranting. Lee looked at Jean. There were tears in her eyes but she was smiling happily, and a slow grin broke over Lee's face. The visit from Cameron's man had served to snap old Jeff out of it with a bang and he was completely himself again.

He turned and snorted at Jean and Lee as though they were in league with his enemies. "You heard him," he growled. "Wantin' to buy the Basin for Cameron and it the prettiest spot in ten states. And loaded with oil to boot. I'll show that fancy Cameron he can't come in here and run me off my own range. Lee, you came in here rarin' about how us cowmen ought to go into the oil business. Why ain't you said anything more about it?"

"Why——" Lee paused, realizing the rancher had just come around. He said gravely, "You wanted some time to think it over, Jeff. I've been waiting for you to make up your mind."

"It's made up!" Jeff said. "I ain't got any cows so I can't ranch, and I don't want to mortgage the Basin to restock. Looks like oil is my only chance to get on my feet again. How much will it cost to dig one of them damn wells, Lee?"

"I reckon it varies some. I heard Cameron planning to allow fifteen thousand apiece for the two new wells he was sinking."

"I ain't got that much cash." Jeff frowned. "Since I went in for purebreds I been puttin' what I had into the spread. I got nine or ten thousand dollars in the bank at the county seat and that's all."

"I need a bigger stake than I've got, Jeff," Lee said slowly. "Maybe this is my chance to make it. I've got around five thousand I'd like to put up with yours if you'll take it."

"Take it! Hell, it's done! We're partners, fifty-fifty."

"I can't do that, Jeff," Lee objected. "You're putting up twice the money I am and it's your land. I can't take half."

"We're partners," the old cattleman repeated, "so let's don't have no foolishness about it. You're gonna do nine-tenths of the work and that squares it."

Lee caught Jean's eye. There was silent pleading in her look that told how desperately she wanted Lee to help her father get back on his feet.

"All right," Lee said. "It's not a fair deal but I'll do what I can to earn my share."

"Let's go inside and talk then." Jeff grinned. "I don't know which way to start."

The three of them talked for an hour and didn't arrive at any con-

clusion except that Lee should ride in to Black Rock and see if he could find or get a line on a reputable man to take charge of buying necessary equipment and sinking the well. But in the first flush of excitement over the new project they talked on and on. And while they talked swift tragedy made itself felt on the Block J.

One of the younger hands had finally rebelled at the advice of the older punchers. The youngster had a fierce if rash loyalty to his spread, and what had happened to the Block J was a personal affront to his pride. In a reckless moment he had decided to right the wrong without help. If he got the moccasined-footed marshal of Black Rock who had led the raid the debt would be squared in so far as he was concerned.

The young puncher had secretly got his horse so no one could stop him and had ridden into town. He found Marshal Nells lounging on the street before the Palace bar and swung down. A few men were on the street, and those who noticed the stiff walk of the puncher stopped to watch.

"You're Nells, I reckon," the puncher said thickly.

"That's right." Moccasin nodded, the smile on his face thinning at sight of the other's stance. "What's on yore mind, feller?"

"I'm sayin' you led the raid on the Block J a week ago. You callin' me a liar?"

"Shootin' words whichever answer I give," Moccasin purred. "Just for yore ears, feller, I did run that herd over the cliff. Now it's your move. Cut 'em loose."

The puncher slashed for his guns and it seemed as though Moccasin waited scornfully until the weapons were coming out of their holsters before he moved. Then the marshal spun away from the wall, and in the same instant both his guns roared. The puncher staggered back, weaved uncertainly and fell forward on his face with a single spot of blood growing on his chest where two bullets had entered.

Moccasin's automatic smile stayed on his face while he blew the smoke out of his gun barrels and punched in fresh shells.

Among those who had seen the fight was Frank Mulvey. He had recognized the puncher as a Block J man and had surmised the cause of the trouble. It was Frank who tied the dead man across his saddle and led the horse toward the Block J. Frank wouldn't have missed this opportunity. Now was the chance to put the finishing touches to Lee Trawick. Frank's hatred for Lee had grown almost impossible to bear since, added to everything else, he had made it practically impossible for Frank to see Jean alone any more. Now Frank had the means to drive Lee from the Basin or drive him against the guns of Moccasin Nells.

Jeff, Lee and Jean came out of the house in high spirits. As they

came down off the porch Frank Mulvey rounded the house from the direction of the bunkhouse.

"Howdy, Frank," Jeff boomed. "You're just in time to wish luck to the new company of Mitchell and Trawick, well diggers."

"What?" Frank frowned, this unexpected news momentarily dwarfing the news he had brought. "You mean——"

"Yep." Jeff nodded. "Lee and me are gonna pool our money and go after oil. We'll show that sidewinder, Cameron, that we're tougher to whip than he thinks."

Disappointment and hate leaped swiftly to Frank's eyes as he turned them on Lee but the latter didn't notice. He was staring wonderingly at the close-bunched punchers before the bunkhouse door.

"What's the matter with the men?" Lee asked.

"Them? Why—maybe you and Jeff better come over there. I was just comin' after you." Frank turned to Jean. "You better stay here."

Jean refused to stay and the four of them walked quickly across the yard. The punchers were angry and sullen and everyone looked at Lee with hot, accusing eyes. They fell back to disclose the body of the dead youngster. Lee felt the impact of their silent accusation and contempt and he turned cold inside. Intuitively he knew what was coming.

"Who brought him in?" Lee asked stiffly.

"I did," Frank answered. "I was in town and saw it happen."

"What did happen?" Lee asked woodenly.

"Well, he—it ain't very pretty, Trawick. I don't like to talk about it."

Lee turned hard, burning eyes on him and drawled, "You've already talked to the men about it. May as well make it unanimous."

"All right!" Frank flung out, flushing guiltily. "He rode into town and jumped the marshal. The boy said he'd come to take the place of the man who—well, who'd yellowed out. The kid was scared himself but he was game. He told Nells you wasn't really a Block J man, Trawick, but you was hangin' around here so when you backed down you give the spread a bad name. He said he was gonna wipe out the bad smell you made." Frank paused to let the carefully rehearsed falsehood sink in; then he added, "But the kid didn't have a chance. Nells shot him down while he was still talkin'. You can see his guns ain't even been fired."

Abruptly Lee turned and headed for the corral.

"Lee——" Jean cried, but Jeff put a hand on her arm to silence her. The old rancher was wise in the ways of men. He knew the regret that was encompassing Lee—and he knew there was only one thing for Lee to do.

Lee saddled and rode out again to meet a man in Black Rock. Only this time he knew before starting that the man was Moccasin Nells. And, knowing that, he had to go on anyway.

CHAPTER XVI

"YOU didn't have to lay it on so thick, Frank," Jeff said bluntly. "Seems like you was enjoyin' it."

"He asked for it!" Frank answered angrily. "And it's his own fault!"

Jeff grunted and said to his men, "Let's take the boy inside and get him ready for buryin'."

"I'm headin' for home," Frank said. Nobody answered, so he swung into the saddle and rode off toward the mesa.

But once out of sight behind the buildings Frank cut around in a wide circle and cruelly put the spurs to his horse. He got the trees that lined Rocky Creek between him and the trail Lee was riding and nearly killed his mount getting into Black Rock.

Frank left his lathered, heavy horse behind a building where Lee wouldn't see it when he rode in and hurried to the Palace.

"It's you again," Cameron said sardonically, as Frank entered his office. "What is it now?"

Frank sat down. "I know a thing or two that you'd like to know," he said. "What's it worth?"

"Less than it was before."

"Hell, everything worked then like I said it would, didn't it?"

"Certainly." Cameron smiled bleakly. "But you overlook one thing. At that time you hadn't sold your friends out. Now you have. What would they do if they knew you were double-crossing them?"

"Why, damn you!" Frank flung out. "Do you think I believe you'd tell 'em?"

"Not me. But I would see that word reached them if it were to my advantage. And you may well believe that. You see, Mulvey, when a man turns Judas he doesn't own his own soul any longer. It happens that now you belong to me." Cameron took out his wallet, extracted a fifty-dollar bill and flung it on the desk. "Now what is it you have to tell me?"

"Nothin', you cheap rat!" Frank fumed. "If it ain't worth more 'n fifty it ain't worth nothin', you low-down, crooked——"

"Give up any ideas you may have of drawing a gun," Cameron broke in sharply. "I already have my hand on one in the drawer."

Frank knew he was cornered and he was too weak to hold out against a man of Cameron's strength. He could still fix Lee Trawick even if he didn't make much money out of it. He snatched up the fifty with a grimace.

"All right, Cameron," he said sulkily. "I'll take it this time but don't get the idea you can push me too far."

"I'm listening," Cameron stated indifferently.

"Well, listen with both ears. Jeff Mitchell and Lee Trawick are goin' into the oil business. They're gonna sink a well in the Basin themselves."

"What?" Cameron burst out.

"That sort of got you, didn't it?" Frank grinned viciously. "Now maybe you know I'm worth more 'n peanuts."

Cameron quickly pulled out another fifty and tossed it over. "I was testing you a moment ago. I pay for what I get. Go on. Who's behind this fool business—Trawick?"

"That's right. It was his idea from the first. He's finally sold it to Jeff and they're gonna sink a well."

Cameron got to his feet and began to stride up and down the floor. "Trawick has been getting in my way from the time he got here," he said angrily. "He's got to be got out of the way; he's the dangerous one. Without his backing Mitchell probably wouldn't go ahead with the scheme or, if he did and Trawick were removed, I wouldn't have any trouble smashing him."

"I was just gonna tell you how to get Trawick," Frank said tantalizingly. "There was a man shot in town this afternoon."

"I heard about it," Cameron said shortly. "What of it?"

"Trawick thinks it was his fault. He's on his way in now to look up Moccasin Nells."

"Why didn't you say so, you fool?" Cameron stormed. "Luck! What luck! That will take care of everything. Get out of here now, fast! I've got things to do."

After Frank was gone Cameron walked hurriedly down the stairs. He went to Diamond Delaney's office and entered without knocking. Delaney was talking to his gambler, Don Lovelace, and the hotel owner's ace gun hand, Slinger, lounged against the far wall.

"Where's the marshal?" Cameron asked curtly.

"He's not around right now," Delaney answered calmly. "Was there somethin'——"

"Get him!" Cameron snapped. "Get him in a hurry!"

"I don't rightly know where he is," the hotel man answered. "Linda wanted to go for a ride and since it was late I knew it would be after dark when she got back. Moccasin said he'd go along and look after her."

"Damn it!" Cameron raged. "When I want a man he's out riding with a woman!"

"Is it something important?" Delaney asked.

"More important than any of you realize. Lee Trawick is on his way to town looking for Nells. I want Neils to be ready for him."

In the silence that followed that statement every man in the room

realized the implication of it. Slinger had no subtlety and it was he who voiced everyone's thoughts. "I get it, Mr. Cameron," he said. "You wouldn't care any if somethin' bad happened to Trawick."

"Well?" Cameron frowned.

"I got a score to settle with Trawick myself," Slinger went on. "Since the marshall ain't around I might drift down to the Longhorn where yore boys hang out. Trawick 'll likely come in there huntin' Moccasin. Me and yore men could arrange a little reception for him."

"If a man wants to settle a grudge there is no reason why I should interfere," Cameron said succinctly, his eyes gleaming. "If he wants to get his friends to help him it is no business of mine."

Slinger grinned wolfishly and slipped out of the office without another word. Cameron lighted a cigar, smiled coldly at the two men and remarked. "The West has a primitive but effective way of settling its scores, hasn't it? Delaney, you and Lovelace have a drink of the stock you keep for me with my compliments."

After Cameron had gone the two men left sat silently for a moment; then Lovelace stirred restlessly and said, "It's plain murder."

"Trawick will have a chance to draw," Delaney said tonelessly.

"Against a dozen men." Lovelace frowned. "Cameron's got the code of the West a little twisted. Are you going to stand for murder, Diamond?"

"I didn't know you and Trawick were friends, Don," Delaney said questioningly.

"I thought you and Trawick were," Lovelace countered.

"I wouldn't say friends exactly. We've known one another a good many years. Trawick's a good man, a mighty good man."

"Yet you are going to let him be murdered?"

"Look, Don," Delaney said imperturbably. "Everything I've got is tied up in this town. If Cameron doesn't make a go of it I'm busted. If he wants Trawick removed it's because somehow Trawick is in his way. Remember, I'm in the hotel and saloon business and you're a gambler. We'll stick to our busines and not go sticking our noses into things that we haven't got anything to do with. Get it?"

It was early dark when Lee rode into town. He went directly to the Palace and swung down. He paused on the boardwalk to settle his gun belt, then walked into the lobby. The clerk started to speak, but one look at Lee's face caused the man to clamp his jaw. The lobby was otherwise empty and Lee walked over to look through the glass door into the dining room.

Unhurriedly he turned and pushed into the bar. Just inside the door he paused to scan the scattering of men. They were the usual broadcloth-clad guests of the Palace, comfortably having their before-supper drinks. The marshal was not among them. Lee hadn't expected him

to be but he was not overlooking any bets. Lee crossed the barroom toward the street door, but just before he reached it Don Lovelace rose from a table to intercept him.

"Evenin', Trawick," the gambler said. "Join me at the bar for a drink?"

"Thanks," Lee said. "Another time."

Lovelace took Lee by the arm and said under his breath. "Get out of town, Trawick. You haven't got a chance. The word is out that you're coming."

Lee was mildly surprised but he couldn't see that it mattered whether Moccasin knew he was coming or not. "Thanks, Lovelace, for bothering," he said. "But nothing's changed. I had business in town. I still have."

"You're a fool!" Lovelace broke out angrily.

"I reckon." Lee nodded.

"But I'm trying to tell you——"

"I know. And thanks." Lee turned and walked out the door to the street.

"Damn him," Lovelace swore, "he wouldn't even let me tell him. He deserves to walk into a trap."

Lee continued his slow, thorough search of the town. He searched the street, the stores and the eating places, leaving the saloons till last. When he got to them he went to the Derrick first and then to the Red Dog. The Longhorn was the only place left and Lee knew his search had ended.

Lee pushed through the swing doors of the Longhorn and walked slowly into the saloon, nerves and muscles keyed for action. It was the unnatural quiet of the place which brought him up sharply. He stopped and ran his glance around the room. All of Cameron's gun crew was there, the men's faces strained, their muscles taut. The place was quiet as a tomb and the lamplight threw grotesque shadows of crouching men against the walls.

Then Slinger pushed away from the bar, his feet scraping loudly in the stillness, and two gunmen took their places on either side of him though with plenty of arm room between. Lee knew then that he had walked into a trap. Moccasin wasn't here, but this crowd of gun dogs was all set for a killing.

Again Lee looked around the room, weighing his chances. There weren't any. Unsuspecting, he had come too far into the room. Slinger and the two gunmen were infront of him; other gunmen ranged the length of the wall, and two others had closed in behind as soon as he had entered.

"Well, hard guy"—Slinger grinned viciously—"I said I'd dance at yore funeral."

"Not a bad setup, Slinger, for a lame brain like you," Lee drawled. "But are you sure *you're* going to bring flowers? I think maybe I can take you with me."

"Think again." Slinger laughed.

That retort and Slinger's confidence sent a cold feeling running up Lee's spine. The gunman wouldn't be so easygoing unless he were sure, and Lee knew that a man behind him already had a gun trained on his back. Then into that room, silent with the nearness of death, a calm voice spoke from the direction of the back door.

"Evenin', gentlemen. Quite a little gathering."

Don Lovelace walked carelessly out of the shadows at the rear, a double-barreled derringer negligently held before him. The gunmen flicked their eyes toward him, then back at Lee.

"Don't anybody get rash and pull a gun," Lovelace went on mildly. "Why, hello, Trawick. You get about."

"Some," Lee said slowly, watching the coiled gunmen for the first sign of a break. "You do yourself. Just out for a stroll?"

"Why, yes. Just happened to be passing and saw you in here. Thought you might like to join me."

"I would. It's a little close in here. Fresh air would feel pretty good."

"Then let's go out for a little. While I stand here you back to the door. I can make it through the rear all right and we'll get together outside."

"Get him!" Slinger yelled at the top of his lungs—and that did it.

Lee lunged to one side but he had been right about the gun on his back. It went off with a shattering roar. The slug caught Lee in the small of the back and spun him over. He hit the floor, tried to rise, but the strength went out of his arms and he slumped down on his face. Dimly he heard another gun roar and another. After that he knew nothing.

CHAPTER XVII

AFTER he had been hit the next shot Lee heard was made by Don Lovelace's derringer; and the last, as he was passing into unconsciousness, was from the gun of the man who had shot him—harmless shot jerked spasmodically out of the man when the derringer load caught him full in the chest.

Lovelace had been unable to see the gunman behind Lee who was already holding his weapon in his hand until Lee went down. With gunmen all over the saloon snatching for their guns Lovelace knocked the back shooter over and his voice rode loud and clear above the echoes of the shots.

"Hold it!" he shouted. "The first man who pulls a gun gets the other barrel of this one!"

The warning froze the gunmen in mid-draw. They stood hunched, taut, poised for the final move that would blow the lid off the saloon. But tight-strung as they were, each one hesitated to dare the blast of the vicious little weapon.

"Ease off," Lovelace warned in a quiet voice. "I can't get but one of you but it will be the first man who draws. These things don't leave a man much chance. Take a look at your friend there."

The gunmen looked around nervously at their pal. It looked as though his whole chest had been blown in. A man might stand a chance with a slug from a six gun, but the buckshot load from a derringer didn't leave any room for doubt.

"You're showing sense," Lovelace said calmly. "Back up now."

Slowly, watchfully, the men shuffled backward, none daring to draw in the face of that deadly gun but all watching for the least possible opening. Lovelace followed them as they backed and at last reached the middle of the room. Without lessening his vigilance, he reached down and caught the back of Lee's shirt collar. Carefully then, a step at a time, he bagn to drag Lee toward the back door.

At the door he paused then, in one movement, he swept Lee to his shoulder and plunged through the rear door into the darkness beyond. The saloon exploded in a volley of shots. Lead mashed into and through the rear of the saloon while wild shouts tore from a dozen throats and feet began to pound in several directions. A tight little smile lighted the corners of Lovelace's mouth as he raced along in the darkness, but for just a moment he wondered if he had crowded his luck too far.

Suddenly a figure darted up beside Lovelace. The gambler whipped up his derringer but the man beside him gasped, "Keep goin'. You're headed right. I know a place can't nobody find neither one of you."

"Who're you?" Lovelace panted.

"Luke," the voice answered. "I seen it all through a back window. You and Lee shore stood off them killers. He's a pard of mine."

Lovelace was so hard pressed at the moment he had to take the chance the old man offered. The cry of the pack was increasing on the street. Guns would be going off any moment now.

"Here!" Luke hissed suddenly. "In this door!"

"What the hell!" Lovelace swore exasperatedly. "They'll search the buildings!"

"They won't look where I'm taking you. Better hurry."

It was too late to do anything else, so with a sinking heart Lovelace leaped through the door. It was dark as pitch inside, but the smell of harness and animal sweat was thicker than the darkness.

"This must be the empty building the freight office took over," Lovelace said bitterly. "One of the first places they'll search."

"It's that buildin' all right," Luke grunted, scratching around in the darkness. "It's been my home for years till Cameron throwed me out so he could rent it to the freighter. I built this room on the back myself. But they just use the front and store stuff back here. When I learnt I could slip in and out o' here at night it fixed everything."

Sounds of the chase pased behind the building, while inside the room there was a rusty, creaking noise. "Come on," Luke said. "They'll be gettin' cagey 'fore long."

Lovelace felt his way along the floor until Luke reached out to guide him. "It's a trap door," Luke said. "Feel yore way down the ladder. I'll let the bunk down ag'in on top o' the door; then we'll be settin' pretty."

Presently they were on the floor of some sort of underground room and Luke lighted a lamp. Lovelace let Lee down easily and, without catching his breath, ripped off the wounded man's shirt. Lovelace frowned at the lack of blood showing but when he pulled off the undershirt he began to understand. He rolled Lee over and grunted. "Talk about luck," Lovelace said. "Look."

A big bullet hole showed in the back of Lee's money belt where the bullet had struck. Lovelace felt the belt. In places it was soft, indicating paper money, but there was also a considerable number of coins. The soft-nosed slug had hit and been deflected by a double handful of twenty-dollar gold pieces. Lovelace loosened the belt to find a big welt against Lee's backbone.

"Bad place to hit him," he commented. "No wonder it knocked him cold. It might have broken his back. But it didn't so he ought to be coming out of it soon."

"Shore," Luke agreed. "He's tough."

Lovelace covered Lee with his shirt and sat down on a box to catch his breath. As he rolled a cigarette he looked about curiously. The room had a cot and chair in it, several boxes, one of which he was sitting on, and a supply of canned food. On the far side of the room was a door.

"How did this happen to be here?" Lovelace asked.

"I dug it." Luke grinned. "Dug it and built the room over it."

"Why?"

"So if I ever needed it I'd have it," the old prospector said evasively.

"Where does the door go to?"

"That? Oh, it don't go nowhere. Look out fer that match! Them boxes is filled with dynamite." As though some explanation were needed for that Luke added, "Big mining company what used to be here left them boxes so I took 'em case I ever needed 'em."

Lee groaned and opened his eyes. Luke bent over him immediately and asked, "How you feel, son?"

"Like I'd been kicked in the back by a mule," Lee said. He turned his head and regarded Lovelace. "So you got me out of there."

"No thanks to me," the gambler said shortly. "If Luke hadn't showed up they'd have got us both."

"It's not much to say," Lee said simply, "but I'm obliged to you both. Maybe the time will come when I can pay you back. What made you do it, Lovelace?"

"Because I don't like cold-blooded murder," the gambler said angrily. "I've seen you buck other men and I'm not one of the fools who think you're afraid of Nells. There's something else there. So I just didn't like the idea of seeing you cut down without a chance—but at that it was none of my business."

"Which makes me more beholdin' to you," Lee said quietly. "You're not as indifferent toward everything that goes on as you make out to be, Lovelace. I hope to see the time when something 'll make you quit foolin' yourself."

"I'm not fooling myself." For a moment the gambler seemed to relent. "I was born in Carolina. My parents had owned a great plantation but they'd lost that after the war before I was born. My father never got over his war wounds, but it was not them that killed him or my mother. It was the carrion that moved in to pick the bones of a people that were down. While I was a kid I learned the extent of man's greed and cruelty. It would have been easy to die in the war; it was hell to be born too late to die. With my parents gone I got out when I was old enough and I swore I'd never have any more to do with people for the rest of my life than was absolutely necessary."

"It's not so easy as that," Lee said gently. "There are things that are bigger than any man is. I see you with Linda a lot——"

"I'm going now," Lovelace said stiffly and got up. "There's nothing more I can do here."

"No. Just tell me this. Where was Moccasin tonight?"

"Out of town."

"Slinger was calling the tune. That wasn't Diamond's doings?"

"It was Cameron's."

"I thought so. All right, Lovelace. I'll see you again and, whether you like it or not, thanks."

Luke put out the lamp and scuttled up the ladder to see that the way was clear. Lovelace followed. Lee tried to get up but found that to straighten his spine was an agony of torture. He groaned and sank back to the floor as Luke returned and relighted the lamp.

"Can't straighten out," Lee complained. "Reckon I'll have to stay here till my back gets easier. Where are we?"

"Under the room I built onto the back of my store," Luke said. "This here's the part I didn't want to lose more 'n the store. I run out on you that day you took me to the Basin on account of I knowed you and Jean would've tried to keep me. I had things to do here."

"What?"

The old man crossed the room and threw open the door on the far side. It gave onto a wide tunnel that seemed to run on endlessly. "The Dover Minin' Company dug this tunnel," Luke said. "Clear under the town with offshoots in every direction."

"Jean told me about that." Lee frowned. "But she said the tunnel had caved in."

"Ever'body thinks so"—Luke chuckled—"them that knows about it a-tall. But the Dover done a good job, and the timbers are sound as ever 'cep in a few little side shafts. I reckon I put in a few hundred little shafts myself the last ten years. I can go dam' near ever' direction under Black Rock and don't nobody know it."

"So you're huntin' the same vein the Dover was."

"That's right. I'll find her, too, one o' these days. I got a idea this here oil foolishness ain't gonna last long. I slip around outside sometimes at night and hear things. I hear they ain't doin' so good with their oil. And I got a idea they ain't gonna do so good with them next two wells they're diggin' neither."

"Word has come to the Block J that they're having trouble with the first well but I reckon they'll get going again. Cameron's not the kind to quit."

Lee struggled to a sitting position and painfully climbed to his feet. He tried to straighten up, but the pain was so intense he couldn't get out of a doubled-over position.

"What you gonna do, son?" Luke asked worriedly.

"I can't do much of anything in this shape," Lee grunted. "The business I came to town for will have to wait. I'll go back to the Block J, I reckon."

"You could stay here."

"Thanks. But Jeff and I are going in on a proposition. They'll think something happened to me if I don't show up. I left my horse at the hitch rack in front of the Palace. Reckon you could get him for me without getting in trouble?"

"Shore," Luke snorted. "Don't nobody know I'm around. I'll get him and fetch him around to the back. Just you take 'er easy."

Luke blew out the lamp and slipped up the ladder silently as a ghost. After he had gone Lee painfully followed. It took him some time to reach the room above and the trap door was almost too heavy for him to lift with his back in the condition it was. Finally he made it and slipped out the back door of the harness room to wait.

In a few minutes Luke showed up, leading Lee's horse. "Warn't a bit of trouble." The old prospector chuckled. "Seen a few of Cameron's gunmen still snoopin' about, though, so you'd better go easy."

"I will till I get over this." Lee nodded. "I'm obliged, Luke. What about you?"

"I'm goin' back to the tunnel. I mostly dig at night. Any time you get pushed duck in here. I know things other folks don't know."

With a chuckle the old man disappeared, and the door of the back room clicked shut. Lee threw the reins over his horse's head and tried to mount. He could scarcely lift his foot to the stirrup and the horse kept snorting and turning impatiently. Round and round they went until Lee was dripping perspiration.

And then a man loomed suddenly in the shadows at the corner of the store. With a grunt he lunged for Lee.

CHAPTER XVIII

LEE struck for his gun but, doubled over as he was, he didn't make it. The man wrapped him with powerful arms, and after a first desperate twist which stabbed him with blinding pain Lee knew he was in no shape to fight. He quit trying and waited. His assailant, for all his strength, was unsteady on his feet and he smelled as though he'd had an alcohol bath.

"You work for Cameron?" the man blurted thickly.

"No," Lee said.

"If you do I'll break your blasted neck! I'll break the neck of any dog I find who works for Cameron!"

"Ease off, fellow. You're about to break my ribs anyhow. I don't like Cameron any more than you do."

"Is that a fact now?" The man released his grip and stood teetering drunkenly. "Then me and you better team up and help the buckaroo get away."

"Who?"

"Ain't you heard? 'Sall over town. Feller named Trawick walked into the Longhorn and it full o' Cameron's murderers. Walked in all alone, he did, and shot it out with 'em. Killed six or maybe 'twas a dozen and walked out. A grand fightin' lad, this Trawick. We got to help 'im get away.

"He made it all right," Lee said and smiled slightly at the drunken exaggeration. There was something vaguely familiar about the man and Lee said, "Are you a friend of Trawick's?"

"Best friend he ever had. Only he don't know it. Got to find him and tell him. Maybe he'll lemme help 'im fight Cameron. Can't no-

body do to Big Tim O'Casey what Cameron did and get away with it!"

"What did Cameron do to you?"

"Throwed me off the rig, that's what! Fired me, and me the best driller ever worked a crew of oil muckers!"

Lee placed the man then as the Irish foreman of the oil gang. Lee didn't know Cameron had fired the foreman, but the Irishman's bitterness gave Lee a sudden thought. He said, "Maybe I know a way you could help Trawick square things with Cameron."

"Yeah? Who 're you anyhow?"

"I'm Trawick."

Tim peered through the darkness. He couldn't see, and a week's bout with the bottle had fuzzed his brain. He grasped Lee's hand and pumped it till Lee almost groaned aloud at the agonizing pain in his back.

" 'Tis a small world, Mister Trawick," Tim said heartily, "and I'm pleased to be in it with a fightin' man like yourself. Now about this Cameron. Do we go to the hotel this minute and tear the roof off the blasted place?"

"We go to the Block J and get some sleep. Can you ride?"

"Anything that's got hoofs and a tail."

"All right. Get in the saddle and pull over to the porch here and I'll climb behind."

They rode quietly behind buildings until clear of the town, then struck the trail to the Basin. By that time Tim O'Casey was asleep and Lee was holding him in the saddle.

The Block J was dark when they arrived. Lee rode to the corral, shook Tim to near wakefulness so he could fall out of the saddle, then half fell to the ground himself. He was loosening the cinch when he heard lightly running feet and Jean called sharply, "Lee!"

"Here, Jean."

She ran up, her night robe rustling as she moved. "Are you all right?" she asked breathlessly.

"Why, yes," Lee answered slowly. "I'm all right."

Her reserve gave way then. She swayed. Lee put his hands on her shoulders to steady her and found her trembling. He said, "Easy, girl. Everything's all right."

"You were gone so long," Jean cried. "I've been waiting on the porch for ages. You—you——"

She suddenly turned and ran toward the house. Lee called her but she didn't stop. Mechanically he unsaddled and shoved the befuddled Tim toward his room. Lee knew then that it would take more than Cameron, Moccasin Nells and a gang of hard cases to drive him from the Basin.

When they awakened the next morning Tim was suffering the tor-

tures of the damned. Lee was in little better shape himself and found that he still couldn't straighten up.

"It ain't the drink that hurts a man," Tim groaned. "It's the lack of it."

Lee found a bottle in his war bag and silently handed it over. The Irishman downed half of it at a drink and sighed happily. Never you fear, Mr. Trawick, my boy, I ain't after goin' on another bust. And I mind our talk about squarin' with Cameron, and 'tis grateful I am to you for the chance. I'll hunt up the cook now, and once I've got coffee and food in my belly we'll talk.

The big Irishman went out to find the cookshack, leaving Lee to the painful job of pulling on his boots. Since he had arrived at the Block J Lee had been occupying a room in the house and having his meals with Jeff and Jean. He eagerly headed for the dining room and found Jean setting the table. She spoke but avoided looking at him. Lee frowned and the eagerness went out of him. It could be that Jean felt that she had shown her feelings too plainly the night before and was self-conscious, or it could be that she had shown only natural concern for a friend of the Block J and the stress of the moment had lent it undue emphasis. At any rate, Lee could not risk hurting her if the latter were true, so there was nothing he could say.

He took a seat at the table just as Jeff stomped into the house. "Who's that Irish hellion at the cookshack swilling coffee?" he asked jovially.

"I think," Lee answered slowly, "he's the answer to our problem. He knows oil and he hates Cameron."

"He does that." Jeff grinned. "He's telling the boys how you walked into the Longhorn last night and shot it out with Cameron's whole outfit of gunmen."

"He's telling it scary." Lee frowned.

"Then what's the matter you're all humped over?" Jeff asked sharply. You hurt, son?"

Instantly anxiety took the place of Jean's evasiveness. She lifted worried eyes and said reproachfully, "You should have told me, Lee."

"It's not anything." Lee shrugged. "I got a lick in the back that it'll take a few days to get over. That's all.

"Nells?" Jeff inquired softly.

Lee shook his head. "He was out of town. I'll see him when I can straighten up."

"You won't," Jeff said emphatically. "Now look here, Lee. You wasn't in a temper to be stopped yesterday so I let you go. But you've got yore head back this mornin'. You ain't to blame for what happened to that boy no matter what anybody says. You wouldn't gain a thing by meetin' Nells, whichever one of you came out alive. We got a job

to do here and I can't risk yore runnin' into a bullet. I want you to forget Nells."

Lee frowned and said nothing for a while. He looked at Jean and read the pleading in her eyes. Suddenly he felt relieved that he didn't have to meet Moccasin. Lee slowly nodded and said, "All right, I'll let it go. We'll get on with the job here."

After breakfast they went out to the porch and Lee called Tim O'Casey. The Irishman had his legs under him again and Lee introduced him to Jeff and Jean.

"And now, Mr. Trawick," Tim said, "I want to know about this business of squarin' with Cameron."

Lee told him then about the small pocket of oil that was under Black Rock, how it had been pinched off from the main pool when nature had, in one of its violent moods, thrown up the ridge, and that the big field was in the Basin. Before Lee finished talking Tim's eyes were shining excitedly. He turned and studied the Basin critically.

"It's a dead cinch," he burst out gleefully. "Cameron has pulled a cropper and the gravy's all here. You can depend on Rawlings. There ain't a better geologist to be found for all Cameron cows him. If he says there's oil everywhere under the Basin then 'tis so. Man alive, you can beat Cameron at his own game! You can bring in oil here and laugh at 'im. I'd give ten years of my life to be in on this."

"We hoped you'd come in on it," Lee said. "We don't know a thing and we've got to have somebody we can depend on."

"I'm your man!" Tim roared happily. "I'll show that big shot I know oil and laugh in his face while I'm showin' him."

"We've got around fifteen thousand dollars," Lee said. "Can we swing it on that?"

Tim frowned and the three watched him anxiously. At last he said, "It ain't much and I cant' say for sure. Depends on a lot o' things." Then his face brightened and his natural optimism asserted itself. "But it's worth a try if you're game. One of you can go to the Coast with me and we'll buy tools and such. We can get secondhand ones from one of the big companies, but you can depend on Tim O'Casey they'll be all right. While we're gone them cow wrasslers—and a fine bunch of boys they are—can spud the ground, cut timber and build the derrick. I'll drill myself when the time comes. The boys can help me, but I'd dig a thousand feet with a shovel to show Cameron he fired the best oilman he ever laid eyes on. I warn you fair, if the oil's down deep we can't make it on that money, but if it ain't—are ye game?"

Lee looked at Jeff's and Jean's excited faces and began pulling off his money belt.

"Shore!" Jeff shouted. "They ain't no cows to punch. I'll make them rannies——"

"You're going with Tim to the Coast," Lee interrupted. "We'll save time that way. You can go by the county seat, draw out your money, take a train and keep going."

"There's sense in that," Jeff agreed, delighted at the prospect of the trip. "Hell, let's get things to movin'. Never thought I'd try to throw a rope on a wild oil well but it ain't too late to learn."

After days of inactivity the Block J suddenly sprang into action. Jean went into the house to help Jeff get ready for an immediate departure. Lee followed Tim on a trip to find the best place to sink the well. The Irishman banked heavily on Rawlings' report and consequently selected the easiest spot from the standpoint of actual drilling. A quarter of a mile in front of the house the Basin was at its lowest point. Tim inspected the ground, found it reasonably soft and marked off a place within a short distance of the creek. Lee asked for explicit directions in regard to erecting the derrick, and Tim went into infinite detail.

When Lee and Tim returned to the house Jeff was at the bunkhouse talking to the men. The morning was almost spent when all the details had been attended to, but Jeff was so impatient to be off he wouldn't even wait for dinner.

"We got a long way to go," he stated. "Look for us back when you see us, but it won't be no longer than it takes this well digger to buy his tools."

"And that won't be long"—Tim grinned—"or I'll bend 'em over a few heads, mark my words."

"I've talked to the boys, Lee," Jeff added. "You're the boss."

"All right." Lee nodded, hiding the worry he felt. "We'll look after things."

The two fastest horses on the spread were brought up and Jeff and the jubilant Irishman swung to the saddle. The whole outfit was present to see them take off in the grand style.

"So a new era comes to the Basin," Jean said.

"I hope so," Lee answered quietly. "I hope so."

After dinner Lee went out to the men. He had been dreading the time when he would have to face them. But, strangely, the men's attitude had completely changed. Lee was vastly relieved and put it down to their loyalty to Jeff. In reality it was due to something Lee had dismissed with a shrug and forgotten—Tim O'Casey's highly colored yarn of the way Lee had bucked Cameron's gunmen alone. The punchers weren't entirely ready to accept Lee yet, for he still hadn't erased the stigma of his first meeting with Moccasin Nells. But to their knowledge he had pulled a tough play the night before; he had obviously been hurt in the fracas, and until such time as something else came up they were willing to declare a truce.

CHAPTER XIX

THAT morning, while activity was getting under way in the Basin, Diamond Delaney sent for Don Lovelace. The gambler, coolly contained and wearing his usual air of indifference, entered the office and dropped into a chair.

Delaney's black eyes rested on him speculatively but not a trace of emotion showed in his face. At last he said, "I thought last night we agreed not to stick our noses into business that wasn't ours."

"I never did agree that I liked murder," Lovelace answered casually.

"You not only hauled Trawick out of there, but you killed a man."

"If you call a hired gunman a man, I don't. Certainly not half the man Trawick is."

"That's right as far as it goes. But Cameron's not going to like what you did, Don."

"It happens that I'm not much interested in what Cameron likes."

"I am," Delaney said flatly. "But for personal reasons I'm glad you saved Trawick's bacon, so I haven't any beef if you can square it with Cameron. But let's get this straight, Don, from now on, I don't want you butting into outside things again."

"I gave in to a sentimental impulse last night," Lovelace said. "I don't think it will happen again."

At that moment Stuart Cameron stormed into the office, his face white with rage. "Delaney——" he began; then he saw the gambler. "There you are! I've just learned what happened last night. You saved Trawick and killed one of my men!"

"Is it the man you're worried about?" Lovelace asked coolly.

"Don't be impertinent. Trawick has caused me considerable trouble and he's got to be removed. If you hadn't interfered he would have been put out of the way last night."

"Then," Lovelace suggested, "you had better plan your business where I can't hear it. Trawick means nothing to me, but I have an unaccountable aversion to seeing a man shot down in cold blood."

Cameron whirled to Delaney. "I don't like the way your man talks, Delaney," he snapped. "Were you in on this?"

"No," the hotel owner said slowly, "I wasn't. It was Don's doing. But I don't think anything of the sort will happen again, Mr. Cameron."

"It had better not," Cameron said shortly. "It will put me to some trouble but I'll let this ride. Hereafter, though, Delaney, I shall hold you responsible for your men. And if you interfere again, Lovelace, I'll have you taken care of."

That afternoon late a puncher from a ranch beyond the Block J rode into town and spread the word that he had ridden in through the Basin

and had seen the Block J hands digging a well. Since the Block J wasn't running cows any longer the punchers must've been prospecting for oil.

The news spread rapidly over town and was received everywhere with jeering laughter. Everyone thought the oil fever had got hold of old Jeff Mitchell and he had gone crazy.

But when the news reached Cameron he was not remotely amused. Immediately he sent for Moccasin Nells.

Moccasin glided noiselessly into the room, the perpetual smile on his face giving him an almost sinister look. "You want me?" he asked.

"Yes," Cameron answered irritably. "Are you the marshal of this town or the personal bodyguard of Delaney's girl?"

"I'll see Miss Delaney every chance I get," Moccasin said, his smile thinning. "But if you're talkin' about last night I wish I'd been here. Lee was runnin' a bluff."

"What makes you think so?"

"He wouldn't have shot it out with me. I wish I'd been around to show him up again."

"You'll get your chance," Cameron said curtly. "I want you to go into the Basin tonight."

"Uh-uh," Moccasin said. "I'll meet Lee anytime but I'm not fool enough to buck a whole outfit single-handed."

"I don't mean that. I want you to take my crew and raid the Basin after dark. I want you to smash that outfit. You hear me? I want every living person there wiped out and the buildings burned to the ground."

"That"—Moccasin smiled—"will be a pleasure. We'll take 'em by surprise and feed 'em lead. When the moon comes up it ought to be good shootin'."

Their muscles aching from the unaccustomed work, the Block J hands turned in early.

Lee sat on the porch of the house talking with Jean. They studiously kept the conversation on oil. At last Lee arose.

"I think I'll ride over the Basin," he said. "My back's loosening up and that might help."

"I'll ride with you," Jean said. "The moon will be up soon. It has been a long time since I've ridden in the moonlight."

Lee had no idea that danger threatened and, because the companionship of this girl was a growing need in his life, he didn't object. A few minutes later they were riding away from the corral. They rode down past the site of the oil well and on along Rocky Creek, content not to talk, lost in the thing that was building between them. The ridge that separated the Basin from Black Rock loomed closer and closer.

Suddenly Lee pulled his horse in and his form went stiff in the saddle. "Wait," he called.

"What is it, Lee?" Jean asked anxiously.

"Horses. Sounds like a good dozen of them. They're coming slow so not to make any noise. I didn't think Cameron——" Lee broke off and his voice hardened with decision and the recognition of danger. "Turn back and stay in the shadow of the trees, Jean. Go easy for two hundred yards; then see how fast your horse can run."

A few minutes later they threw all caution aside. Their horses were eager to run and they gave the animals their heads. Lee hoped the movement of the large body of riders would cover the sound of the two running horses and apparently it did, for open pursuit didn't develop.

Lee and Jean whirled into the protection of the buildings and Lee was calling sharply for the men before he dismounted. The bunkhouse leaped to life as Lee quickly unsaddled and slapped the horses into the corral. A dark figure appeared, coming from the direction of the house.

"Who's that?" Lee snapped, his hand on his gun. "Sing out!"

"Frank Mulvey," came the disgruntled answer. "What the hell? I was ridin' by and thought I'd stop in for a little——"

"All right, Mulvey. Maybe you'd like to help us welcome some more visitors."

The men poured from the bunkhouse, strapping on their guns as they came and asking questions. In an urgent voice Lee told them that he thought a raid was coming. Quickly he split the men into three groups, assigning one to the bunkhouse, one to the barn and one to the ranch house.

"This is our chance to smash Cameron's gun crew," he finished. "Everything depends on surprise. Let 'em ride into the yard before a shot is fired and we'll take 'em from three sides. Don't anybody shoot until I give the signal. Watch the barn and when I fire cut loose! Jean, get into the house and stay away from the windows."

"You're staying outside?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

"Then I'll go with Jean," Frank said succinctly, "so nothin' will happen to her."

"Good enough," Lee answered. "All right, boys, get going and stay out of sight."

The men, keyed to a fighting pitch and reveling in the opportunity to crack down on the gang which had slaughtered the Block J herd, faded into the shadows to seek advantageous spots. Just then the moon cleared the rim of the Basin and drove out the shadows with a clear soft light. Lee crouched at a corner of the barn from where he

could command a view of the whole yard and wondered just how the raiders would go at it.

Then the subdued sound of walking horses and an occasional clink of a bridle bit reached Lee. The raiders moved quietly into the grove of trees before the ranch house and stopped. Three men, each carrying a bulky object, slipped from their saddles, and then Lee understood the scheme. The three men were carrying cans of coal oil; it was their intention simultaneously to fire the house, the bunkhouse and the barn. It would have been a deadly plan had it come as a surprise. Driven out and at the same time made visible by the fires, everyone on the Block J would have been at the mercy of swooping, flashing horsemen. The Block J would have been annihilated.

Under his breath Lee savagely cursed men who could conceive and carry out such butchery. He slipped out his gun to take care of the man quietly stalking toward the barn. Lee felt confident that such seasoned fighters as the Block J hands would quietly slug the men headed for the bunkhouse and the ranch house. In time the main body of riders would either lose patience and move into the yard or would become suspicious and try a charge. In either event the Block J would have the brutal killers in a trap.

The three men neared their objectives and all over the yard tension seemed to mount as hidden men, stalked and stalkers, tightened for the supreme moment. Then from the house a gun roared!

Instantly the yard seemed to explode into action. The three men afoot dropped their cans and dived for cover. The keyed-up Block J punchers let their hammers fall at the signal of the gun explosion. The startled raiders in the grove split in every direction and their guns crashed with reckless abandon.

Lee swore angrily at the overwrought man in the house who had let his nerves get away from him and had sprung the trap too soon. Lee stepped around the corner of the barn, saw nothing of the three who had been afoot, so thumbed his gun with blinding speed toward the trees.

"Rake the grove!" he yelled.

From three directions the Block J poured lead beneath the trees, but it was a waste of ammunition. After that first answering volley the raiders had jerked their horses around and dug in the spurs. The thunder of hoofs beat loudly for a moment, then diminished in the distance. A single rider shot away under the cover of the grove and soon another followed. It was all over.

From the three buildings the Block J came into the yard, swearing in chagrin and disappointment. Lee was the last to join the group. "Who fired that shot and gave the play away?" he asked tightly, trying to keep his temper under control.

"Why, I did," Frank Mulvey answered defiantly.

"You!" Lee snapped. "Would you mind telling me why you warned those murderers and gave them a chance to get away?"

"I didn't warn them!" Frank said angrily. "A man on the other side of the house where you couldn't see him was about to set the building afire. If I hadn't cut loose he would've. I missed but I scared him off."

"You could just as well have clipped him," Lee said bitterly. "It's your fault the whole gang is still alive to keep causing us trouble—"

"Frank did what he thought was right, Lee," Jean said gently.

Lee snorted and turned away. He gave orders to the men to search the yard, and it was discovered that the man who had tried to fire the barn was the only casualty. He had been completely in the open, and a half-dozen slugs in that first salvo had cut him down.

"Tie him to a saddle," Lee directed. "I'm going to pin a note to him, carry him in and dump him on Cameron's doorstep."

"That's a needless risk," Jean exclaimed.

"It may warn Cameron that from now on we'll be ready for him and he won't try anything like this again." Lee turned to the men and paired them off in watches. "Hereafter we'll guard the Basin night and day."

A short time later Lee set off for Black Rock with the dead man tied to a skittish horse. Before daylight he had dumped the body on the porch of the Palace as a warning to night raiders to stay out of the Basin.

As Lee rode toward town Frank Mulvey rode toward his own spread. Frank was highly pleased with himself. He had saved Cameron's gun crew so it would remain a constant menace to the Block J and he had diverted suspicion from himself. When he thought of Lee's tongue-lashing Frank cursed viciously. The time would come, he swore, when he would nail Lee's hide to a fence.

CHAPTER XX

IN the days that followed the Block J worked with its guns always within reach and at night riders patrolled the Basin. The well sank lower and lower. Lee's back had healed and, feeling deeply his responsibility, he did more work than any other two men.

Then one day, with the work about completed, two horsemen rode rapidly through the gap leading from Black Rock. Instantly the punchers put down their tools and reached for their guns. Lee slipped his gun into its holster and shaded his eyes with his hand. Jean, who never strayed far from the job, moved up beside him.

Suddenly she exclaimed, "It's Jeff and Tim!"

Lee nodded and a slow smile was the only evidence of his relief. "From the way they ride," he said, "they're in pretty good spirits."

That proved to be an understatement. When they arrived Jeff and Tim were jubilant. "We done it," Jeff greeted them jovially. "We got everything we needed. We ain't got a cent left, Lee, but we got more junk than you ever saw. This damned Irishman can beat a Scotchman driving a bargain."

"I didn't have to crack the first head doing it neither." Tim grinned.

Greetings were exchanged all around and Jeff asked, "How have things gone here?"

"All right," Lee said. "We've had no trouble."

"By the blessed saints!" Tim exclaimed, looking down into the shaft. "If we'd stayed another week, Jeff, we would've had no need to buy tools. These buckos have spudded near down to the oil itself."

The men grinned with pleasure and Lee said, "When will the stuff get here?"

"Tonight," Jeff answered. "We rode back on the freight that brought it to the county seat and I spent the last of our money arranging to have it hauled out here. We stayed till it was loaded, then rode on ahead."

The next day the drilling tools were put to work. Tim O'Casey did the work of ten men in getting the rig set up. The men were caught up by the Irishman's infectious enthusiasm and, inexperienced as they were, they were quick to catch on and carry out his orders. Just before dark the small donkey engine they had acquired began to snort; Tim yelled exultantly from the top of the derrick; the drilling tools began to turn, and the bit caught hold. The well was going down!

The well was down over a thousand feet when the first difficulty presented itself. The men had knocked off for dinner when Tim joined Lee, Jeff and Jean who stood to one side, talking.

"What's the matter, Tim?" Jeff asked. "You look like a rainstorm on St. Patrick's Day. Nothing wrong with the drilling?"

"'Tis the easiest drillin' ever I put a bit into." Tim frowned. "We're goin' down at three times the speed I made in Black Rock. An' that's what's troublin' me. We're close to twelve hundred feet down. Do you know we can't go further than fifteen hundred?"

Lee jerked up his head. "You mean—"

"It's all the tools I got and all I could buy with the money we had. If we don't strike oil within the next three hundred feet either we're licked or else we got to raise money to buy more tools."

In the excitement of the drilling they had all forgotten the handicap of their limited funds and Tim's news hit them with stunning impact. "If it comes to it I can mortgage the Basin," Jeff muttered.

"That would be bad business," Lee objected. "Cameron would hear of it and might somehow get hold of the paper."

While they stood, silent and anxious, Frank Mulvey rode up from the direction of Black Rock. He had dropped by regularly, pretending interest in what was going on but in reality keeping Cameron posted on the progress being made. Frank pulled up and it was with difficulty that he kept the gloating tone out of his voice.

"Cameron's two wells came in today," he announced. "One this mornin', early; the other just awhile go."

"I reckon that's why we haven't been bothered with him," Lee said.

"Hell," Jeff swore, "let his wells come in. They'll dry up fast enough. We'll show him some oil before we're through."

"If we have tools enough," Tim reminded him.

"Havin' trouble?" Frank asked casually.

"Not yet," Tim said. "But we can't drill more'n three hundred feet more. If we don't strike by then we're done."

"Cameron had to go to eighteen hundred on both these wells," Frank said.

"To hell with Cameron," Jeff grunted. "We'll go as far as we can, then see what's to be done. Get yore dinner, Tim, then go ahead with the drillin'. If we can't make it we can't, but it'll shore be the end of the Block J."

CHAPTER XXI

STUART CAMERON'S dormant arrogance returned with interest when the two wells came in. He didn't believe the makeshift outfit in the Basin would have any luck with its well. The quicker they went broke the easier it would be for him to move in.

If by an off-chance Jeff and Lee brought in oil Cameron knew what he would do. He would bring in more gunmen, as many gunmen as were necessary to take the Basin by force. The sheriff of the county had ridden over once from the county seat and Cameron had sized him up correctly. The sheriff was a politician to his finger tips and wouldn't make any sort of stand until he was sure he was on the winning side.

But Cameron's immediate need was money. He couldn't bring in more gunmen until he had money—the crew he already had was beefing for back wages. The laborers, too, were grumbling because they hadn't been paid, and the big freighter swore he wouldn't moe a barrel until he was paid five thousand dollars on the account already owed him.

A stormy scene ensued. In the end Cameron realized he would have

to raise the money to pay the freighter, since everything depended on the oil moving out. He gave orders to his laborers to fill every available barrel during the rest of that day, while he sweated over a way to raise the money without letting the moneyed crowd know that he was hard pressed. He was one of them and he knew how the pack leaped upon one of its number who was crippled. It was the next day before it occurred to him where he might borrow the necessary money, and by the time he thought of it it was too late.

When the labor gangs turned to the next morning the wells had ceased to flow.

That was a terrible day in Black Rock, a day in which violence smoldered close to the surface, ready to burst its bonds on the slightest pretext. The laborers were silent and sullen; the hired gunmen prowled with vicious tempers; the teamsters were loud and dangerous. Worst of all, the moneyed crowd was thin-lipped and angry; their patience was gone; their faith in Cameron and the whole project was about at an end. It seemed to them that if oil were present it could be got out of the ground.

It was late afternoon, after a day of ceaseless pacing and fuming, when Stuart Cameron reached his decision. He had to have the Basin immediately. Even so, he would have to sell shares in his company now to raise money to develop the Basin, but he could retain the controlling stock and still make plenty. But he had to have the Basin and, since there was no money with which to bring in additional gunmen to storm it, there was just one way. He sent for Moccasin Nells.

Moccasin padded into the room and, without preliminaries, Cameron snapped, "What would you do to make a thousand dollars cash?"

"Anything," Moccasin said flatly.

"That's what I thought. I want Lee Trawick and Jeff Mitchell killed. At once."

"Why?"

"Do you want the thousand or are you going to stand around all night asking questions?"

"I'll take the thousand." Moccasin grinned.

When Moccasin left the room Diamond Delaney overtook him in the hall. They descended the stairs together and Delaney motioned toward his office. Once inside, he shut the door, lighted the lamp and, without saying anything, opened his safe. He counted out some money and tossed it across his desk.

"When you came here," Delaney said impassively, "I told you I'd match any other offers you got. You work for me. There's a thousand dollars. Go back and tell Cameron you won't kill Trawick and Mitchell."

Moccasin's smile thinned and his eyes narrowed. He said softly, "You know a lot, Diamond."

"More than anybody thinks," Delaney grunted.

"Maybe you better let me in on it, Diamond," he said. "You'll need me."

"Yeah, I'll need you. I'm not a gunman, and you're the best there is except maybe Trawick, and you've got him buffaloed somehow. I meant to let you in when the time was right. That seems to be now. When everything's done here you know who'll be boss of this country? Not Cameron or Trawick and Mitchell. Me!"

"Go on," Moccasin said.

"I've kept the room next to Cameron's suite vacant and bored holes behind pictures so I could listen in when I wanted to hear something. Cameron's sunk his money on a small pocket of oil. The big pool is in the Basin."

"So that's it. Have you had anything to do with makin' Cameron's wells quit producin' fast as he puts 'em down?"

"No. That's been luck. It's made him desperate."

"What's the play for us?"

"To do nothin' but sit back and let Cameron and the Basin crowd fight it out. They'll kill one another off. Whichever side wins, the winner will be weak as water. We'll step in and smash him and take over."

"Neat. Neat as I ever heard."

"You play along with me and I'll make it worth your while."

"You sure will, Diamond"—Moccasin grinned wolfishly—"but not the way you think. Not for wages. Count me in for a fifty-fifty split on the whole deal."

Delaney's burning eyes bit into the gunman's crafty ones for a long intense moment, and then he said, "All right, Moccasin, you're in. Go tell Cameron that you won't do his job. Let them kill one another off."

Grinning satanically, Moccasin went back up the stairs toward Cameron's room. Moccasin had an idea of his own. Maybe Diamond could make his play stick. If he did Moccasin considered he was set for the rake-off. But Cameron couldn't be sold short, and if he came out on top Moccasin meant to be in on that too. Lee Trawick and the Basin crowd would have to be smashed; then Moccasin could play Delaney against Cameron and choose his side.

Moccasin paused at the door adjoining Cameron's suite, took the key out of the inside, locked the door and put the key into his pocket. Then he went in to face Cameron.

"Well?" Cameron said.

"I been thinkin' things over." Moccasin grinned. "You're awful

anxious to knock Trawick and Mitchell off, Mr. Cameron. It wouldn't be that you want the Basin awful bad, would it?"

"What business is it of yours?" Cameron asked harshly. "Do you want that job or shall I hire somebody else—"

"That's just it," Moccasin said softly. "There ain't another man with guts enough to go into the Basin and buck Trawick and you know it. You want the Basin awful bad, don't you? You're ruint without it. Well, I know how you can kill off some of that crowd and bust the rest of 'em flat as hell."

"If your idea is feasible," Cameron said coldly, "you'll still get your money."

"I'll get more'n that, Mr. Cameron. I got the answer that'll work. To get it you're gonna have to cut me in on half the take from now on. Me and you are gonna be partners."

Moccasin's audacity caused Cameron actually to smile. Cameron wondered if the man really thought he could put something over on him. Cameron could scarcely conceal his scorn for the hired gunman, but he was so hard pressed at the moment he couldn't afford to overlook any bets. When the time came Cameron could get rid of the gunman and do it legally—frame him into prison or a hang noose.

"Go ahead," Cameron said. "You seem to be calling the tune. If you have a plan that will give me the Basin I'll cut you in."

"Fifty-fifty," Moccasin said. "And don't think you can double-cross me. You wouldn't stand much chance at the end of my guns. All right, the idea is simple. Trawick and all that crowd gather around the well every mornin' when they start drillin'. I've watched 'em a half-dozen times from the ridge. Well, one man wouldn't have any trouble gettin' into the Basin tonight. Send one in and have him plant a nitroglycerin cartridge in the well shaft. When the tools go down in the mornin' they'll explode the shell. Then tools'll come out of that shaft rippin' all hell in front of 'em. They'll get most everybody gathered around the well, and when they smash the derrick that'll finish off the rest of 'em. How does it sound?"

"It will work," Cameron snapped. "Even if everybody isn't killed their equipment will be ruined and they haven't any more money. I can get a third party to buy in the Basin for a song. You're no fool, Nells."

"I'm a financier." Moccasin grinned. "Don't forget that."

An hour later Cameron answered a knock on his door. As he had expected it was Frank Mulvey.

"I got word you wanted me," the rancher said.

"Yes." Cameron, feeling expansive and sure of himself and the future, tossed over five hundred dollars. "You can still get into the Basin without trouble?"

"Sure." Frank laughed. "I'm a friend of the family. But you're gettin' mighty bighearted all of a sudden. You don't want me to commit a murder? If you do just keep your mon—"

"You won't get caught," Cameron said bleakly. "I want you to plant a nitroglycerin shell in the shaft of the well out there. When they start work in the morning they'll explode it. If anybody gets hurt we can't help it."

"Say," Frank shouted, "that'll do it! That'll finish the Block J."

"Exactly." Cameron smiled coldly. "I've sent word to my foreman to have a shell ready, a fifty-quart shell. Pick it up and see that you don't make a slip anywhere."

"Me slip! Hell, I've been waitin' for a chance like this for weeks!"

CHAPTER XXII

AFTER Mulvey left to pick up the nitroglycerin torpedo Stuart Cameron sank back into his chair and pulled on his cigar with relish. The Basin, he felt, was as good as his.

Cameron's thoughts turned to the present problem in Black Rock. The moneyed crowd had lost confidence in him but not irrevocably. All at once Cameron sat up with a jerk; then a pleased smile lifted his thin lips. It had occurred to him that he might borrow some money from Diamond Delaney.

Cameron decided the best plan was to make an immediate and ostentatious display of his resources. He would pay his men their back wages and pay that damned freighter five thousand. And the next day he would send out the barrels that were already filled as though nothing were amiss. That would make the moneyed crowd sit up and think Cameron was putting something over on them. And that—Cameron smiled—was what he intended to do.

He went downstairs and found Delaney in his office with Moccasin Nells. Cameron said, "I want to talk a little business with you, Delaney."

"Sure, Mr. Cameron," the hotel man said. "Moccasin, maybe you—"

"Oh, the marshal can stay. This needn't go any further because of the general effect it might have, but it really amounts to very little. I simply need a little ready cash. I have bonds and securities, of course, but it will take awhile to convert them into cash. Meantime I need a little ready money."

"How much?" Delaney asked stolidly.

"Oh, say twenty thousand."

"That's not chicken feed," Delaney said. He was silently thought-

ful for a moment. "I've got the money all right, Mr. Cameron, but this is business. If your wells were producing there wouldn't be anything to it, but they're not and I can't afford to lose that much money."

"Of course not." Cameron laughed deprecatingly. "Your investment here is pretty well dependent upon my success, Delaney, but if you want to put this loan on a business basis I have no objection. Suppose we make it a thirty-day call loan?"

"Fair enough."

Delaney shoved paper and pen toward Cameron and turned to his safe. Cameron rapidly wrote out the note, signed it, and when he had finished Delaney laid a sheaf of bills before him.

Cameron pocketed the money and said, "You might drop a discreet word in your bar, Delaney, that oil will move out tomorrow. I'm going down now to give orders to the freighters. The difficulties I have had with my wells are an inconvenience, but the men who think I am ruined are fools. Within a few days I'll show them something. Good night, gentlemen."

Delaney was hard put to it to wait until Cameron had gone to speak. He turned to Moccasin and grunted. "He's smooth but he's finished. Borrowing that money was a last act of desperation. And what a piece of luck for us! I'll call this loan when it's due and we'll take over his equipment, lock, stock and barrel. At twenty thousand it'll be dirt cheap. We're doing all right, Moccasin."

"Not bad." Moccasin grinned. "Everybody around here thinks he knows more'n everybody else. I wonder who knows the most? Well, I'm gonna take a walk. You goin' in to supper?"

"Not yet," Delaney said slowly. "I got a few things to look after first."

Fifteen minutes later the lobby of the Palace was a scene of wild confusion. Several oil laborers had come upon the unconscious body of Stuart Cameron lying in the alley beside the building occupied by the freight outfit. A wicked gash on the side of his head was bleeding profusely.

The news spread fast, and Diamond Delaney appeared in the lobby and took charge of the milling crowd. While he gave directions to four men to carry Cameron up to his suite Moccasin Nells came in and followed up the stairs. When Cameron was stretched out on a couch in his front room Delaney set about cleansing the wound and stanching the flow of blood.

All at once Cameron came out of it and was in immediate control of his faculties. He shoved himself to a sitting position, his eyes blazing, and whipped out, "Get out of here, you men! Everybody but Delaney and Nells! Get out, damn you!"

The laborers who had brought him up left hastily. Cameron lurched

to his feet, went behind his desk and turned to face the two men with a leveled derringer in his hand. "All right," he rasped, "which one of you was it? Nobody knew I had that money on me but you two. Talk or, by God, I'll kill you where you stand!"

"Easy, Cameron," Delaney said. "I take it you were robbed."

"You take it—not badly put, Delaney," Cameron said viciously. "Just as I reached the corner of the freighters' building I heard a step in the alley. Before I could turn I was clipped. Talk, Delaney!"

"You're worked up," the hotel man said slowly. "Like you said a little while ago, my investment here depends on your success. I sure as hell wouldn't want you to go busted. And it wouldn't do me any good to call that note when it's due if you haven't got the money to pay. What would I do with a pile of machinery?"

"I'll have the money to meet that note even if I lose this," Cameron grated. "But I'm not losing this. Now you talk, Nells."

"I was down at the Longhorn havin' a drink." Moccasin grinned thinly. "There are plenty of witnesses, yore own men among them."

Cameron swore and threw down his gun. Delaney said, "With so much riffraff in town it could have been anybody. Whoever it was probably didn't know you had so much money on you, but there are plenty of men in town who'd murder a man for a ten-dollar gold piece."

"I mean to find who did it!" Cameron raged, dabbing at the blood that ran down his cheek. "Nells, go round up my gun crew. Take them to your empty jail and search them. I don't trust a hired gunman out of sight. But if they're in the clear then use them to help you comb the town. I want every damned man in this town searched and grilled. Get along! Delaney, go down and send me up a bottle of brandy."

The two men left the room and turned down the stairs. But on the landing halfway down they stopped of one accord.

"Not bad, Diamond." Moccasin grinned. "Now you've got the note and the twenty thousand."

"You're kiddin'," Delaney said with narrowed eyes. "I don't mind Cameron's losing the money. It will finish him that much quicker. But you cut yourself in on this deal fifty-fifty. You don't keep the whole twenty thousand, Moccasin. You're handing ten of it back to me."

"What the hell!" Moccasin snapped, his smile turning wolfish. "You acusin' me of takin' the money?"

"Didn't you?"

"Hell, no! Didn't you?"

"No."

The two men stood glaring suspiciously at one another. They had reached a stalemate and each knew there was nothing he could do. But in the mind of each was planted the seed of distrust which in time would bear evil fruit.

CHAPTER XXIII

THAT night Black Rock bordered on an open outbreak of violence which was checked only by the deadly guns of Cameron's hard cases. Under Moccasin's direction the town was systematically padded down and searched. Only in the Red Dog where the teamsters were congregated was there an open break. The teamsters flatly refused to be searched, and when a gunman tried to force the issue a teamster broke his head with a whisky bottle.

Moccasin Nells leaped through the door at that moment and shot the teamster through the heart. Moccasin was backed by the whole crew of gunmen and the teamsters were licked before they started. They swore and cursed the gun hawks while they were being searched.

In the end nothing came of the search. It was finished just as day was breaking. Those who could sullenly went to bed; the rest sullenly went to work. Moccasin, who had enjoyed the night's brutal work, padded silently into the lobby of the Palace just as Linda Delaney, dressed in riding habit, came down the stairs.

"Mornin'," Moccasin said, smiling.

"Good morning," Linda answered cooly. She turned to the clerk. "Will you send one of the bar boys for my horse?"

"I'll get him while I'm gettin' mine," Moccasin said. "I'm goin' ridin' with you."

"If you don't mind I want to go alone."

"But I shore do mind. I wouldn't take anything for these rides we have."

"In that case," Linda said bluntly, "the atmosphere needs to be cleared. I like to ride and in the late afternoon Diamond has insisted that I have protection. The choice was between riding with you and not riding. There is no such choice now and I don't have to put up with your company."

Moccasin turned his slitted eyes on the clerk and said, "Get out!" When the clerk had hurriedly ducked into the dining room Moccasin said softly, "You're goin' pretty far out of yore way to be nasty to yore pa's best friend."

"My father's friends are not mine and I loathe hired killers," Linda said levelly. "Is everything clear now?"

"Not quite. You're gonna like me a lot before long but maybe I

oughta know what things stand in the way. I heard that before I got here you and Lee Trawick were pretty big friends. Are you soft on him?"

"Lee is worth a dozen like you."

"So it's like that, huh?" Moccasin said. He looked out the door at the growing light. "Well, just any time now Lee will be dead."

"Murder is your business"—Linda nodded—"but I don't believe you. None of your crowd would have courage enough to go into the Basin and fight."

"There are other ways," Moccasin said vindictively. "Lee might even kill himself. Suppose they hit a nitro shell when they start drillin' this mornin'." Moccasin laughed wickedly and walked toward the bar. At the door he said, "I'll be around when Lee's gone, lady, so you might just as well start likin' me now. And maybe you hadn't better go for a ride this mornin'. Not for an hour anyway."

He disappeared into the bar and Linda felt the blood drain from her face. For a moment panic crowded Linda; then her thoughts became ordered and she flew up the stairs. In a few minutes she was hammering wildly on Don Lovelace's door.

The gambler was adjusting his cravat when he opened the door. "Why, Linda," he said.

She rushed into the room and grasped his arm. "Don, you've got to get a horse and ride to the Basin! Nells or some of that crowd have planted a nitro shell in the well out there! They'll all be killed! Hurry, Don! Oh, please hurry!"

"That's bad but why should I cut in on this game here, Linda?" Lovelace frowned. "I did once but I won't again."

"But it's murder, Don, and you could stop it!"

"Is it Trawick?"

"It's Lee and that old rancher and the men and I hear there's a girl out there. Oh, Don, how can you be so callous? Doesn't anything matter to you?"

"Yes," Lovelace said heavily, "and if I go I'll rob myself of that. But I'll go. I swore I wouldn't interfere here again, but for your sake I will, Linda."

He snatched up his coat and ran out of the room.

"Look out for Moccasin Nells," Linda cried.

Lovelace didn't hear her. He was bitterly thinking that Linda was the one thing in the world that did matter to him, and the crowning irony in his life was that he was going to save another man for her.

Entirely unsuspecting of anything amiss, the Block J turned to its work that morning. Tim O'Casey and two other men climbed to the top of the derrick and got ready to lower the drilling tools. The last

thing the night before the tools had been pulled for additional lengths to be added.

Lee, Jeff, Jean and several punchers stood to one side, anxiously watching the preparations. The next day or two would determine their fate, for if they didn't strike oil at a depth of fifteen hundred feet they were through.

The rider who had been patrolling the Basin on the side nearest Black Rock rode up on his way in for breakfast.

"Quiet night?" Lee asked.

"Yeah. Didn't see or hear a thing. That is, outside of Frank Mulvey. He rode through the gap sort of late, headed for home."

"Frank better pay more mind to raisin' cows," Jeff grunted. "He spends too much time in town. I hope to hell we got tools enough to make it!"

"We're goin' down," Tim yelled.

Those on the ground crowded inside the base of the derrick.

As he ducked under a beam Lee noticed something caught in a long splinter of wood. He dislodged it and found it to be a two-inch length of a gold watch chain.

"Who caught his watch chain and broke it?" Lee asked the men. "It's gold with small links."

"Ain't none of this crowd ever been in hollerin' distance of a gold chain," one of the men answered.

"Keep your eyes peeled below," Tim shouted, "and run like hell if anything gets away from us up here. Miss Jean, you sure ought to get outside."

Jean laughed excitedly and shook her head. Lee abstractedly dropped the length of chain in a pocket and moved over beside Jean so he could be near to help her should the need arise. Slowly the tools started down the shaft. Close to twelve hundred feet had been played out when Lee jerked up his head.

"I hear a horse," he said. "From the sounds of him he's being ridden hard."

Quickly Lee ducked outside the derrick, followed by the others. Off toward Black Rock a horse was coming at breakneck speed, but he was too far off for the rider to be recognized.

Lee shouted to the three men atop the derrick: "Can you up there tell who's coming?"

Tim and his two helpers walked to the edge of the derrick and shaded their eyes against the early sun. The drilling tools slipped sharply a few feet and then the whole Basin seemed to explode!

Lee was half turned toward the derrick when that terrible blast went off. As he was slammed to his back he saw the tools shoot out of the shaft like awful instrument of destruction. Rending, tearing

metal smashed and tore at the derrick until several of its great beams wrenched loose and flew wide. One of the men atop the derrick was catapulted off by the blast; another was on his back on the platform when the first metal rods carried the platform away; Tim O'Casey actually somersaulted the entire length of the derrick to the ground.

Lee twisted to his knees, snatched up Jean and lunged clear of the falling metal and timbers. The men were scuttling like rats in a storm to get clear of the crushing missiles. In almost no time it was all over. It seemed odd that anything could be so devastatingly terrible and end so quickly. A wisp of smoke issued from the mouth of the shaft, but the only noise was the sound of a running horse.

Lee still held Jean in an embrace so crushing she finally said tremulously, "You can put me down, Lee. It's all over."

"Yes," Lee said bitterly. "It's all over."

CHAPTER XXIV

AFTER a minute the men began to get over the shock. They started in swearing, and it was evident that Tim O'Casey wasn't dead, for his curses were louder than those of any two men. O'Casey's arms and face were gashed and bleeding, but there was nothing wrong with his lungs. The derrick had withstood the assault reasonably well in that it hadn't completely crumpled. But it was sagging and shattered, and twisted lengths of drilling tools lay everywhere.

"We're riding into town, boys!" Jeff roared. "If Cameron did this he and his dirty gun hands won't live to tell about it. Go get horses—"

"Hold on, Jeff," Lee broke in. "We've got men hurt here. We'll look after them, then see what's to be done."

"That's right, Lee. But let's get on with it."

The man who had been catapulted off the derrick had both legs broken. The one who had been hurled off with the platform had, by some freak twist of the boards, had his fall broken and suffered nothing more than a broken wrist.

"We can fix them up all right," Lee said in a quiet, strained voice. He indicated a puncher and said, "Run to the house and hitch up the wagon so we can move the men."

"He can use my horse to ride to the house," Lovelace offered, coming up behind Lee.

Lee said, "Thanks. So it was you coming."

"Yes. But I got here too late to save you."

"Then you knew this was going to happen? We'll talk that over later. Anyhow, it was hearing your horse that caused us to get out from inside the derrick. Otherwise we would've all been killed."

When the wagon arrived the two hurt men were carefully lifted to the bed. Lee nodded to the driver to go ahead and turned to Jeff. "Come on up and help me set the breaks, Jeff. Then we'll need to talk before you cut loose your dogs. If you don't mind, Lovelace, I'd like for you to come too."

Just then Tim O'Casey let loose a roar that might have been heard in Black Rock. "Oil!" he shouted. "By the blessed saints, oil!"

Lee and everyone else made a concerted rush for the well. Tim was on his knees at the mouth of the well, a broad grin on his face, while out of the shaft a thick black-green liquid bubbled and boiled.

"The dirty heathen that tried to wreck us brought in our well!" Tim shouted and laughed. "Sure he used our tools for a go-devil and ruined 'em, but we can buy plenty of tools now. The blackguard that planted that torpedo did us a favor. Maybe our tools never would've reached the oil and never would I have fired off a load of nitro that size. The low-down devil tried to murder us and brought in the well!"

An hour later Lee entered the kitchen where Jean, flushed with happiness, was pouring up coffee for Jeff and Lovelace. The punchers' breaks had been set; they had been given a bottle of whisky apiece and put to bed in the room where the Block J foreman was still an invalid, though almost recovered, from the wounds he received the night the herd was destroyed.

"Pour Lee a cup, Jean." Jeff grinned. "Coffee ain't much to drink to the well with but it'll have to do till later."

"I wouldn't care if it had oil in it." Lee smiled. "Say is Tim cleaing up the mess? I'd better go down and give him a hand."

"Oh, relax a little, Lee," Jean said. "Tim said he'd have the pump rigged by dinnertime if he had to kill all the boys to do it. This afternoon the well will begin to produce. Think of it! Just think of it! We've won!"

"Looks like it," Lee admitted. He looked at Lovelace. "This is the second time you've put me in your debt, Lovelace. But you knew that the blast was going off. How did you know?"

"Linda found out somehow," the gambler said heavily. "She sent me out here."

"She saved our lives. I'll go in to town and thank her soon."

"Yes," Lovelace said tonelessly, "you ought to. You ought to see her more, Trawick. She didn't know the others out here. It was you she wanted to save."

"Linda," Lee said gravely, "is a great lady. She's had a rotten life, but I've got an idea she'll be taken out of it soon."

Jean was standing behind the others, and at Lee's words a stricken look drove the happiness from her face. She slowly put her hand to

her mouth, then left the kitchen so quietly no one saw her go except Jeff. He got up slowly and grunted, "Excuse me."

Jeff found Jean crying quietly in a front room. The old cattleman went to her and pulled her head against him. She wrapped her arms about him and gave way to her heartache, while he said nothing.

Unconscious of what had happened, Lee went on talking. "Do you know why I think Linda will be taken out of that mess in Black Rock, Lovelace?"

"No," the gambler answered shortly.

"Because I think you're going to snap out of your case of standoffishness and take her out."

"Me!" Lovelace gasped. "I would in a minute if I had a chance. But it's you Linda—it's you——"

"You're mistaken," Lee said gently. "Linda and I are old friends, nothing more. The first time I saw you together I knew she was in love with you."

"But one day in the Palace she said you were the greatest man she'd ever known."

"She said that in front of you?" Lee laughed quietly. "She was just trying to prod you awake. Look, Lovelace. All her life Linda has been dragged from one hell-roaring town to another. As long as you're a gambler you're a part of all she hates. You can't blame her for hiding her feelings till she knows you will take her away from all that. Go tell her you will and see what she says."

"I can't do that." Lovelace frowned, his pride making him fearful of a rebuff. "I don't believe all you've said."

"All right." Lee shrugged. "I hope you come alive in time."

Lovelace got up and walked to the back door. He stood there a moment, thinking. Frank Mulvey came up, and the gambler moved aside to let him enter, then went on without speaking again.

"Morning, Mulvey," Lee said. "Pour yourself up a cup of coffee."

"All right. Where's Jeff and Jean?"

"Why"—Lee looked around—"they were here a minute ago. Went inside, I reckon. They'll be back."

"Looks like hell busted loose down at the well," Frank said carefully.

"It's an ill wind," Lee answered, rolling a cigarette. "The snake that planted that nitro brought in our well."

"Got any idea who it was?"

"No. But when I get time I'm going to look into several things. Cameron is beginning to get under my skin."

Jeff stomped into the kitchen. "Looks like visitin' day," he grunted. "I saw Luke comin' out the front window. What 're you lookin' so glum about, Frank?"

"You don't look like you've just struck oil," Frank countered quickly.

"Never felt better," Jeff said gruffly. He went to the door and shouted, "Here we are, Luke, you old coyote. You ain't been out here in a hell of a time."

"Howdy, Jeff," the old prospector answered. In a moment he came through the door, grinning broadly, and greeted the others. "Well, Jeff, I never thought I'd see the day when you'd fiddle with somethin' you couldn't put a brand on. That Irishman down there says you roped yore maverick too."

"Shore did," Jeff replied. "There's more comes out of the ground than gold."

"Which reminds me." Luke reached inside his shirt, pulled out a small package wrapped in a brown paper sack and extended it to Lee. "Son, would you mind keepin' this for me?"

"Valuable?"

"Some. Sort of a mortgage like. If anything ever happens to me you can have it."

"I don't know what I'd have a mortgage on, but all right," Lee said, shoving the package inside his flat money belt. "You always did say you knew a lot, Luke."

"I do." The old-timer chuckled. "I got ways and means."

"There are them that say you got a big stake cached away," Frank said casually.

"Yeah? Maybe I have." Luke's faded eyes twinkled. "Sometimes when diggin' won't work a little hammerin' will."

The others didn't see the dangerous greed that leaped to Frank's eyes, for just then Big Tim banged through the door.

"Well, we'll be pumpin' soon," he bellowed proudly. "What 're we gonna pump into? What are the arrangements for takin' the oil out?"

"Huh?" Jeff asked blankly.

"Well, damn us for plain dumb fools!" Lee said in an aggrieved voice. "Here we've gone and got oil without a barrel to put it in or anybody to transport it!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE latest obstacle had come as such a shock that for a time nobody said anything. Strangely, it was Luke who broke the silence. "Hell," Luke scoffed, "there's a big freight outfit layin' idle in Black Rock. Hire it."

"No chance," Lee said glumly. "Not since Cameron brought in the last two wells."

"Ain't you heard?" Luke cackled. "Both them wells quit flowin' yestiddy."

"The devil you say!" Tim exploded.

"That right, Frank?" Lee shot out. "You were in town yesterday."

Frank nodded sullenly. "Yeah, that's right. They did like the first one, just quit overnight."

"Shore." Luke grinned. "And I hear Cameron ain't paid the freighters and they're sore as stirred-up rattlers at him and his whole gang."

"Still Cameron has a contract with the outfit," Lee pointed out, "and when the wells get fixed up and begin to produce again the freighters will have to haul Cameron's oil."

"Reckon that's right," Luke agreed, "except for one thing. Them wells ain't gonna get fixed up. They ain't never gonna produce."

"You sound sure, Luke," Lee said questioningly.

"We're all friends here; I may as well tell you." Luke laughed to himself a moment, then said, "I'm the cause of them wells not flowing!"

"How, in the name of all that's holy?" Tim yelled.

" 'Twan't hard." Luke chuckled. "Lee, you know 'bout the minin' shafts that run all under the town——"

"The old Dover shafts?" Frank asked narrowly.

"Lemme alone and I'll tell you. Yeah, the old Dover shafts."

"I thought they'd all filled in," Jeff grunted.

"Well, they ain't," Luke said. "I put a trap door leadin' to 'em under the bunk of the room I built on the back of my store. I never would've bothered Cameron if he hadn't bothered me. But when he throwed me out of what had been my home for ten years I fixed him. The shaft of the first well went down right past a tunnel I'd dug off the Dover's main tunnel. I dug a little more and got to the shaft and at night I picked and sawed a hell of a hole in the shaft."

"That's why I couldn't find the trouble!" Tim roared belligerently; then all at once he began to laugh. "Damn me for a moonlighter! You sure fixed that job neat. The pump throwed the oil right out the break you made in the shaft."

"That's right." Luke grinned. "The lower end of the main tunnel is knee-deep in oil."

"But I probed that shaft," Tim exclaimed. "You must've——"

"Yep. I figgered you might jab somethin' down in there, so I fixed up a piece of tin to cover the break and ever' time I hear'd the machinery quit I covered the hole up."

Tim was roaring with laughter and Luke was getting a big kick out of what he had done. He went on, "The last two wells warn't far from tunnel offshoots neither. Fast as they drilled I dug, and I got to them shafts in plenty o' time to fix them too. I've shore squared things with Cameron!"

"You have, with interest." Lee nodded slowly. "But he brought it on himself. From the first he's tromped everybody he could. You've

done this country a favor, Luke, to keep him from getting a hold. I'm going in to see if the owner of the freight outfit will do business with us. What's his name, Frank?"

"Huh?" Frank was so eager to get to town to sell what he had learned to Cameron the he hadn't even heard.

"Do you know the freighter's name?"

"Yeah. Jennings. Frisco Al Jennings, he's called. I'll ride in with you, Trawick. I got some business in town."

"Get the pump rigged, Tim," Lee said, getting to his feet. "I'll get barrels to you soon or else. You want to ride in, Jeff?"

"Yeah." Jeff nodded. "Might as well."

"Where's Jean?"

"She—well, she ain't feelin' so good. You want to see her 'fore you go?"

"No, don't bother her. I'll see her when I come back."

After seeing Linda that morning Moccasin Nells prowled around town like a sorehead grizzly. His most vulnerably point, his conceit, had been cut to the core. A dozen times he padded into the lobby of the Palace to see if Diamond Delaney was down, but the hotel owner had been up late the night before and was sleeping late.

The last time he came out of the hotel Moccasin passed one of Cameron's gun crew whose job it was to keep watch on the Basin from the ridge.

"What's up?" Moccasin snapped.

"Big explosion out at the well awhile back," the man answered.

"No kiddin'. Anybody hurt?"

"Couple of punchers broke up some. Nobody else. And they're riggin' a pump, so the blast must've brought in the well."

Moccasin's thin smile made his wild cursing seem particularly vicious and wicked. At last he gave the puncher a shove and said, "Go on and tell Cameron. That ought to give him a real big appetite for breakfast."

At that moment Delaney came down the stairs and Moccasin glided back into the lobby.

"It's time you was gettin' up." He grimaced. "Come on in the office; I want to see you."

Without changing expression Delaney went into the office and Moccasin kicked the door shut. "Let's have it," Delaney said. "It can't be good, the way you look."

"That all depends. Just how bad, Diamond, do you want to pull off yore little scheme here?"

"I want to bad enough because there won't ever be another chance like it in my life—I've got to because if I don't I'm busted. Why?"

"Because I could smash yore play. In a half-dozen ways I could smash it."

"You could. But you won't."

"I won't if I get what I want."

"You get a fifty-fifty split. What else do you want?"

"Linda!"

Moccasin flung out the final part of his price and waited. Delaney stared expressionlessly and at last shook his head. "You want too much, Moccasin."

"You think she's too good for me?"

"Linda? No. It happens she and I don't have much to do with one another, but there hasn't been any way to break things off. I'd as soon see her married. But you want too much. If you get Linda you get only forty per cent of the take here when we're set."

"You don't pass up a chance to drive a bargain, do you?" Moccasin grinned. The deal suits me. But you tell Linda to come down off her high horse and tell her in a way that'll stick."

"All right." Diamond nodded. "Now if that's all I'll go get my morning coffee."

The hotel owner calmly headed for the dining room, leaving Moccasin lounging against the doorjamb of the office. Moccasin heard brisk steps clicking on the stairs and looked up to see Cameron descending. His face looked like a patch of December landscape in forty-below weather. He saw the gunman and his lips barely cracked as he said, "Have you heard?"

"Yeah"—Moccasin nodded—"I heard."

"Go into the office. I want to talk to you."

Cameron was closing the door when Frank Mulvey sneaked into the lobby. He had left Lee and Jeff down the street and hurried on, driven by the news he carried. When he saw Cameron he scuttled across the lobby like an oversized weasel and squeezed through the door.

"Get out of here," Cameron said bleakly.

"What the hell?" Frank grunted. "I got news, Mr. Cameron."

"I've heard all the news I can stand for one morning. You brought in their well for them, didn't you?"

"Hell, I can't be blamed for that," Frank exploded. "I did what you said——"

"And you're going to do what I say now. Everything you've had a hand in has backfired. You're a traitorous snake and I have no further use for you. From now on stay out of my sight!"

"For that what I know is going to cost you plenty," Frank said maliciously.

"I'm not interested in what you know. Stay away from me or I'll turn Nells loose on you."

"Why not?" Moccasin grinned thinly. "Want me to take him now?"

Frank's jaw slacked with fear. He hadn't even seen the gunman. Hastily he backed toward the door and just before he darted through he flung out, "You played hell not listenin' to me, Cameron, but you can rot now before I tell you what I know!"

The door snapped shut and Cameron swung his frosty eyes to Moccasin. "Now that their well has come in I don't mind telling you I'm crowded. Unless Trawick is got out of the way so I can get hold of the Basin quickly I'm through."

"If he'd just come to town——"

"That doesn't matter now. I've got a hole card. I know a way to put the law on Trawick."

"Things must be bad if you're gonna call in the law."

"I'm goin to. I want you to ride to the county seat fast as you can and bring the sheriff back."

CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN Lovelace got back to town from the Basin he didn't go directly to the Palace but, after stabling his horse, took a long walk along Rocky Creek. Turning the things Lee had said over and over in his mind, he walked farther than he had intended; consequently it was some time after he had returned from the Basin before he went back to the hotel.

Just as he entered the lobby Linda burst through the door from the dining room, her face furiously white, and ran for the stairs.

"Linda," Lovelace called. "I was—why, what's the matter?"

She had turned on the steps and was trembling so violently she had to hold to the banister for support.

"What is it, Linda?" Lovelace repeated.

"It's Diamond," she said in a choked voice. "He sent for me to come see him. Do you know what he wanted? He told me I had to be nice to that killer, Nells. I would be nice to Nells or find myself a home. I've never had a home anyway, so I'm going. I—I'm going far away from here."

"No need for that, Linda," Lovelace said in a flat, dangerous voice. "I'm going to kill Nells."

"Don!" Linda grasped the banister tighter and ceased to tremble. "Don, I believe you mean it."

"I never meant anything so much in my life!"

The anger drained out of Linda and with it the expressionless mask which was her defense against the world. Tears welled in her eyes and

in that moment she was softly beautiful. "Don," she cried, "I've waited so long for this! You don't have to face Nells."

"I intend to."

"But you might be killed and I—I'm leaving Diamond no matter what happens. There's a much better way—oh, do I have to do it all?"

"You mean," Lovelace gasped, "that I can take you out of this?"

"What else can I mean? I've always hoped you would, but first you had to want to get out yourself."

"I finally saw that," Lovelace said with a slow, full smile. "We'll never have a better friend than Trawick. I hope someday our trails will cross again. Go to your room, Linda, and pack the things you need. Stay there until I come for you. Go on now. I've a few things to clean up and then we'll be on our way to—somewhere."

Linda flew up the stairs and Lovelace turned back to the lobby. It wasn't his way to do anything furtively, so he meant to see Delaney. He paced the lobby restlessly, thinking the hotel owner would never finish his breakfast. Slinger, Delaney's private gun hawk, came in from the street, eyed the gambler malevolently and went into the office. Then Delaney came through the door from the dining room.

"Did Linda go up to her room, Don?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Yes." Lovelace nodded. "Diamond, I'm leaving you. I've got a little money coming to me."

"Four hundred and twenty-three dollars." Delaney nodded. "Come on inside."

They went in and without saying anything more Delaney opened the safe and counted out the money. But when he handed the bills to Lovelace he said, "A man's business is his own, Don, but I hate to see you go. Mind telling me why?"

Lovelace answered carefully, "I'm taking Linda away, Diamond."

Delaney stared, his black eyes revealing nothing; then without turning his head he said, "Slinger, go upstairs and guard Linda's door. Don't let her out or anybody in. Use your gun if necessary. Go on." The gunman slipped out of the room and Delaney kept talking. "You overstepped yourself once, Don, and I let it pass. This time I won't. You're leaving all right, but you're leaving alone."

Lovelace smiled slightly and in a soft drawl said, "I don't think so, Diamond." He nodded and walked out the door.

Meanwhile Lee had been having his troubles. He and Jeff had started into the freight headquarters when Lee saw a worried-looking man coming from the direction of Cameron's wells. Lee recognized him as the representative of the concern buying Cameron's output of oil.

"There's a man I was going to look up," Lee said. "Let's see what he has to say, Jeff."

They crossed the street and waited until the buyer approached.

"You represent the company that's buying Cameron's oil, don't you?" Lee asked directly.

"What oil?" the man growled. "I'd be buying it if there was any."

My name's Trawick and this is Jeff Mitchell," Lee said. "We're from the Basin."

"Oh yes. My name is Clarke. I've heard you men were sinking a well. Risky business, isn't it, for men who don't know anything about oil?"

"Some," Lee said dryly. "We brought the well in this morning."

"What! You mean to say——"

"That we'll be pumping in no time," Jeff put in. "We're sort of lookin' around for a market."

"Then by all means let's have a talk," Clarke said eagerly. "Come on down to my room at the Palace."

"That's not necessary," Lee said. "You can tell us what we want to know right here. How close are you tied up with Cameron?"

"I've given up on him," Clarke stated flatly. "We've had barges and men tied up idle in the river for weeks. It's cost us considerable money, and I've just concluded that the company would simply have to take a loss in so far as Cameron is concerned."

"Would you care to do business with us?"

"Would I! I'll tell you frankly that it will be a break for me and the company if you will sell us your oil. I'll buy every barrel you can produce at the market price. And I'll put the whole thing in writing if you like."

"No need for that, I reckon. You satisfied, Jeff?"

"Sounds all right to me." The rancher nodded.

"There's just one more thing," Lee said. "We've got the oil but we need ready cash."

"All right," Clarke said. "I'll pay cash on delivery at the river. How's that?"

"Fair enough."

"Good. Now when do you think you can get out your first load?"

"Tonight, maybe," Lee answered.

"As soon as that?" Clarke exclaimed. "That's better yet. Well, I'll send word and money at once to my man at the landing. He'll pay you cash for every barrel you can deliver."

"Then it's settled."

Clarke bowed with extreme cordiality and hurried on toward the Palace.

"Well, that takes care of the market end of it," Lee said. "Now let's see if we can get the stuff delivered."

They crossed back to the other side of the street and entered the freight building. They told the freighter, Frisco Al Jennings, that

they'd brought their well in and had made arrangements for a market if they could deliver their oil.

"We haven't got any ready cash," Lee finished, "but if you'll haul our output we'll pay you as fast as we're paid."

"You talk straight and look straight," Jennings said roughly, "but I ain't gonna move nary another barrel without I see cash first. Cameron owes me a wad of money and no tellin' when I'll see it, if ever. Sorry, feller, but there she lays."

"That's final?" Lee asked, striving to hide his disappointment.

"That's final."

"You've got a big stack of barrels out back. Any chance to buy 'em?"

"I'll sell 'em to you and deliver 'em in the Basin"—Jennings nodded—"but the same way—for cash."

"It looks like what we need most is money."

"Ain't it hell?" Jennings sympathized. "I'll sell you the whole stock of barrels and deliver 'em for three hundred dollars."

"Stick around," Lee said. "We'll be back."

Jeff followed him out to the boardwalk and the old rancher's face reflected complete dismay. "What are we gonna do, Lee?" he asked.

"I think we can pull it off," Lee said thoughtfully. "I can get the three hundred, I reckon. Will all the ranchers around you let you borrow their rolling stock?"

"You mean——"

"We'll haul the stuff ourselves. You get back to the Basin, Jeff, and send the boys to every ranch within reach. Borrow wagons, buckboards, everything on wheels——"

"We'll do it, boy!" Jeff yelled. "We'll shore pull it off."

"It's our only chance. We'd better make the drive after dark and pull around Black Rock so Cameron won't turn loose his gun crew to make trouble. He might wreck us if he knew about this. Take off for the Basin, Jeff, and round up the wagons. I'll see to the barrels, and if they get there before I do tell Tim to fill 'em as fast as he can. We're going to freight oil tonight if it kills the last one of us."

Jeff hit the saddle and Lee walked swiftly to the Palace. He knocked on the door of Delaney's office but didn't get an immediate answer, for the hotel man was engrossed in putting two and two together. Five minutes before Delaney had been in the bar and had overheard the oil buyer send a man to the river with money to pay for oil to be delivered from the Basin. The buyer had sent word that the first shipment would probably arrive that night.

Lee knocked again, received an answer and went in. Delaney looked up and grunted. "Well, Lee. It's been some time since you dropped by."

"I've been busy, Diamond," Lee said as he dropped into a chair.

"Yeah, I been hearing. Seems funny, you turning into an oilman."

"I haven't quite turned into one yet." Lee shrugged ruefully. "I need a little money. Is my name good with you for a thousand dollars, Diamond?"

"Your name is," Diamond said stolidly, "but I'm in a hole myself. Looks like Cameron's not doing so well and that puts me out on a limb. And I've heard he'd like you better dead, which don't make you such a good risk. Your name's good, Lee, but I got to look after myself—and Linda. I can let you have the money, but I'd have to have security."

"I reckon so," Lee acknowledged. "Trouble is, I haven't got any."

"Why," Delaney said casually, "you're in cahoots with Mitchell. I'd let you have up to five thousand for a lien on Mitchell's ranch. Not that I want the thing or could use it if I had it. It's just that I got to have security in case anything happens."

"I see your side of it," Lee admitted. "Well, I can get by on three hundred."

"Sorry," Delaney said. "The shape I'm in even that's money. I'd want security. Can't you get Mitchell to sign——"

"I could but—we're not mortgaging the Basin. I don't blame you, Diamond; you have to look after your own interests. Well, I've got one more chance to get the three hundred before night."

"Will the freight outfit haul your oil for that?"

"Maybe we can get along without the freight outfit."

"Don't think I'm prying, Lee," Delaney said studiedly, "but that's a dangerous trail over the mountains. You want to look out for Cameron."

"I always look out for Cameron," Lee said noncommitally. "So long, Diamond. Next time you lift a glass drink to the new oilman."

"I'll do that," Diamond said impasively and, as Lee passed out the door, added softly, "or to his corpse."

For a long moment Delaney stared the way Lee had gone while the fires built in his eyes again. "So you're going to haul the oil yourself," he grunted. "I always said you'd run up against something too big for you, Trawick. This is it. I'll put Cameron onto you and tonight you can kill one another off. Then I'll step in and take over!"

When Lee left the office he looked for Lovelace in the bar and the dining room without success, then stepped out onto the boardwalk. Just at that moment the gambler came out of the livery barn down the street, leading two horses. Lee walked swiftly toward him.

"Hello, Lee," Lovelace said warmly when they met. "I'm glad to get the chance to—well, thank you before I go."

Lee was quick to understand. "Don't thank me," he said. "You'd have caught on sooner or later."

"Later might have been too late."

"You're taking her away?"

"Yes."

"Does Diamond know?"

"He knows and he doesn't like it." Lovelace grinned cheerfully. "Slinger is guarding her door and maybe Diamond means to sit in too."

"And you're heading right down the main street to the front door?" Lee shot out. "Man, don't be a fool. They're gunmen, both of them."

"I know." Lovelace shrugged. "But I don't see any other way than to face it."

"What good will you be to Linda dead or shot up?" Lee asked urgently. "She wouldn't have anything ahead of her then, Don. You can't do that to her."

"Well," Lovelace admitted slowly. "I hadn't thought of it that way. Still I don't see any other——"

"Where are you going when you leave here? What are you going to do?"

"Why don't you go to the Basin and stay until you have a chance to figure out something?"

"Thanks, Lee. I can see why Linda thinks what she does of you. But it won't do. I won't add my troubles to those you've already got."

"All right," Lee said. "How would you like to take on some of those troubles? I was looking for you anyway. There's no limit to the future this oil business has. I was hunting you to offer to sell you an interest in the Basin well."

"I'd like nothing better," Lovelace replied. "But that's out too. I've only got about five hundred dollars."

"Right now three hundred looks as big as thirty thousand to us. Here's what I want you to do. First hand over the three hundred. Then take those horses to the rear of the hotel and ground-hitch them there. My horse is in front of the freight building. Meet me there quick as you can."

Lee returned to the freight building to find Jennings tilted in a chair against the wall of the front room.

Lee walked in and planked the handful of folded bills down on Jennings' knee. "There's three hundred," Lee said briefly. "Now how soon can I get those barrels?"

"Fellow," Jennings said, "I like the way you do business. You'll get those barrels quick."

Lee went outside to his horse and was taking the rope off the saddle when Lovelace hurried up. "Make it all right without anybody seeing you?" Lee asked.

"So far as I know," Lovelace answered. He was cool and composed but his face was alive with inner excitement. "What's the play?"

"Where's Linda's room?"

"Third floor back."

"How close to the outside stairs?"

"About four or five windows, I'd say."

"Good. You can throw the rope in the window from the second-floor landing. Linda won't have far to slide down. Give me time to get Slinger interested; then get Linda out and hit it for the Basin."

"What do you take me for, Trawick?" Lovelace snorted. "I'll brace Slinger——"

"We haven't got time to argue," Lee snapped, "and I wouldn't trust another man to this job. I don't want a ruckus, I tell you. I've handled hard cases like Slinger plenty. Let's go."

They set off together toward the Palace. The sun was beating down unmercifully, and there were few people on the street.

Several buildings short of the Palace Lee said, "You'd better cut through here to the back of the hotel. Give me time to reach Slinger; then work fast. No matter what happens, you keep going."

Lovelace nodded and turned into an alley. Lee continued on until he reached the entrance to the Palace lobby. He paused briefly to glance up and down the street, then casually entered the hotel. Delaney was leaning carelessly against the door to his office, but there was a wariness beneath his studied indolence. His black eyes probed Lee searchingly.

"Without pausing Lee headed for the stairs, saying offhandedly, "Is Cameron upstairs, Diamond?"

"I don't know for sure," Delaney answered. "Thinking about hitting him for a loan?"

"It's an idea." Lee smiled and sauntered up the stairs.

Once out of sight he sped swiftly to the third floor and turned down the hall toward the back. Slinger hunkered against the wall, indolently smoking cigarettes and grinding them into the carpet when he finished. He raised his head when he heard Lee's footsteps and when he saw who it was came lithely to his feet.

"Who 're you hiding from, Slinger?" Lee asked easily.

"Not you," the gunman bit out. "You've been makin' yorself some scarce around town lately."

"That's right, I have. I've been busy."

"You might call it that." Slinger grinned insolently. "But since the day you met Moccasin some people have been callin' it somethin' else. I'm one of them people thinks you're all bluff."

"Maybe someday we'll find out," Lee said, "but not now."

"That's what I figgered," Slinger snapped, completely sure of himself now. "Well, listen, feller. You stepped on my toes a time or two. The next time you get in my way I'm gonna smoke you."

"Then I'll try not to get in your way," Lee murmured. "Right now I'd like to see Miss Delaney. Is she in?"

"Yeah, but you ain't gonna see her. You—what's that?"

A thump had sounded inside the room and Lee stifled a curse. He was just as certain as though he had been within the room that Linda had tied the rope to the bed and when she dropped her weight on it the bed had slid a foot or so and thumped the wall.

"Damn you, if you're pullin' somethin'——" Slinger whirled and was through the door in a flash. Linda's head was just disappearing below the window sill as he leaped across the room.

"Stay away from that window, Slinger!" Lee's voice cracked like a whiplash from the door.

Perhaps Slinger thought he, too, had made Lee crawl, or perhaps he was driven by desperation at what Delaney would do to him later. At any rate, he flung himself aside, whirled and struck for his guns.

Regret sent a stab through Lee at what he had to do, but there was no help for it. His hand dropped like a plummet and in the same instant it seemed his gun roared. Again and yet again he thumbed the hammer; then he ran to the window without even looking at Slinger. There was no need to look: Lee was a master gunman.

A shout arose from somewhere in the hotel and feet thumped below as Lee reached the window. Linda had just landed in Lovelace's arms on the landing, and both were looking up with strained, anxious faces.

"Ride!" Lee whipped out. "I may be held up here for a while, Lovelace, but it won't be anything serious. Tell Jeff to make the haul tonight whether I'm there or not. Everything depends on it."

"But I won't leave you to face——"

"If you figure you owe me anything you'll see that that oil is hauled! You hear? The oil has got to be moved. Now get going!"

"All right. If that's the way you want it.'

Lee turned away from the window and strode into the hall. At the head of the stairs he met several eagerly questioning hotel employees. Lee ignored them, but on the second floor he met Delaney lunging up the stairs.

"Sorry, Diamond," Lee said thinly. "Slinger lost his head."

"So?" Delaney grunted dispassionately. "I warned him not to tangle with you. He wouldn't listen. I reckon I can guess the rest of it."

"I reckon you can."

"Linda was my business, Trawick."

"You ought to have given a little more time to that part of your business, Diamond."

Silently then they descended the stairs together. As they came into the lobby three men entered from the street—Cameron, Moccasin Nells and a man wearing a star on his vest.

"There's Trawick," Cameron said quickly.

"You Lee Trawick?" the sheriff asked.

"That's right," Lee said, walking forward and leaving Delaney standing on the bottom step.

"You're under arrest," the sheriff announced.

Lee kept a short rein on his already tight-strung nerves. Slowly he looked at the men, at Moccasin's wolfish grin and Cameron's bleakly triumphant face. Quietly Lee said, "What for?"

The sheriff extended a piece of paper and said, "This I O U calls for seven hundred dollars. Witnesses can prove you signed the I O U after you had lost the money at poker, and you lost it without consent of the house that you could play without cash. Any jury in this country will call that stealin'. You denyin' this is yore signature?"

"You can't make this stick, Cameron," Lee said softly. "I took up that I O U and it's lucky for me there's a man here that can prove it."

"Crawl, Trawick," Cameron said bleakly. "Just who here will prove it?"

"Diamond Delaney. I gave him the money to take up that paper." Lee turned and looked at the hotel owner. "Tell the sheriff, Diamond, that I paid off that note."

"I would if I could, Trawick," Delaney said heavily. "The trouble is, this is the first I've heard of it."

Cameron laughed scornfully, and Lee slowly let the breath gust out of his lungs. He said, "Are you denying I gave you the money to take up that I O U, Diamond?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Lee saw the fires blaze in the hotel man's eyes and grasped the truth. Lee was going to jail, and Delaney had guessed that the Block J—the whole outfit, Jeff and all the men, all the stock and all the wagons—was going to take the dangerous, cliff-sided trail through the mountains that night. They would be completely at the mercy of an ambush if Delaney chose to pass on his knowledge to Cameron.

"I'm not going to jail," Lee said quietly to them all. "Whenever you're ready make your play."

CHAPTER XXVII

AFTER Lee spoke nobody said anything for several seconds. Time was suspended as Lee faced the sheriff, Moccasin Nells and Cameron. The break to the tense scene came from an unexpected quarter.

"I've got a gun aimed on your back, Trawick," Delaney said from the foot of the stairs. "The first move you make I'll pull the trigger."

For a moment Lee had a reckless impulse to take a chance, but he realized it wouldn't even be a chance. He had ignored Delaney in this situation, for usually the hotel man didn't carry a gun.

"Put up yore gun, Diamond." Moccasin grinned. "Lee is pullin' a bluff. He wouldn't draw against me. Put yore gun up and I'll show you he'll back down."

"I'm still aiming at your back, Trawick," Delaney said. "Don't try anything."

The tenseness went out of Lee and his wide shoulders sagged. Without looking around he said, "I always figured we just saw things a little different, Diamond. I never thought you were a snake. I know better now."

The sheriff came forward importantly and lifted Lee's gun from its holster. "A gun hawk, are you?" he growled. "I'll see that that gets known to the jury too. It won't help you any. How's the old jail here, Marshal?"

"I haven't had any customers," Moccasin answered, "but it's tight enough. Figurin' to leave him with me?"

"Overnight. I've got business on down at the end of the county and as long as I'm over this way I might as well ride on down there. I'll pick Trawick up in the mornin' and take him to the county seat."

"Why don't you just leave him here?" Moccasin asked. "We'll take care of him."

"Black Rock is not incorporated, and until it is there's no real authority here."

Lee was herded up the street by the sheriff and Moccasin. He was crowded into the front cell of the jail and the door locked. The sheriff nodded and went out to ride on about the business of mending his political fences.

Moccasin put the key in his pocket and grinned through the bars at Lee. "You shore look funny in a cell," he said. "Times change, don't they, Lee? From a upright gun marshal you end up a jailbird." Moccasin grinned sardonically and padded out of the jail.

Left alone Lee stood a long time at the bars while a full realization of his predicament came home to him—and with it a growing sense of the danger that hung over the Block J and everyone on it.

Lee rolled a cigarette, touched a match to it and began to pace the length of the cell. As he continued to turn developments over in his mind the conviction grew that Delaney was in with Cameron on everything that had happened in and around Black Rock; that they were partners and had been from the start.

It was stifling in the small cell, but the perspiration that was dripping from Lee turned cold and clammy. If Delaney and Cameron were partners it was a foregone conclusion that the hotel man would pass on what he had surmised in regard to the Block J's plans. It was equally certain that Cameron would move swiftly to take advantage of the situation.

Lee flung the cigarette aside and gound it under his heel. If he couldn't get out or get word to the Basin Cameron's opportunity to destroy the Block J and take over its holdings had come.

Lee was pacing the floor when he heard the outer door of the jail open. He leaped hopefully to the barred side of his cell, but his hopes were dashed when his visitor proved to be Moccasin Nells again. The killer look was starkly plain in the eyes of the little gunman as he crouched in the center of the jail corridor, his lips writhing with the will to kill.

"I just found out you helped Lovelace get Linda away," he said viciously. "Linda was goin' to belong to me."

"I'm just finding out how low Diamond really is," Lee said quietly. "Yes, I helped get her away. You aren't fit to be in the same room with her."

"I ought to kill you," Moccasin raged. "I ought to shoot you down where you stand!"

Lee's eyes narrowed and for a long moment he regarded Nells. At last he said, "I believe you would."

"I would if there was not a better way!"

"I ought to have known this sooner," Lee said slowly. "You're another mistake I made. I see that now. Hand me my gun from the desk there and we'll shoot it out."

"I wouldn't give you the hundred-to-one chance. I want to see you squirm, damn you, you and yore honor! I followed the tracks to the Basin, so I know Linda's there. I'll get her back later on tonight. First there'll be some other business to look after. We hear yore friends are goin' to haul oil over the mountains tonight. Well, before they get off the mountain trail they're gonna get a surprise they won't never get over—because they'll all be dead. Sweat that over!"

Grinning wickedly at Lee's tortured face, Moccasin glided noiselessly out of the corridor and out of the jail. Lee gripped the bars until his muscles ached. Now that what he had feared was a certainty the horror of his helplessness was overpowering. How long he stood there holding onto the bars Lee didn't know, but he was suddenly startled to realize that it was practically dark in his cell.

Lee walked stiffly to the window and at the corner of his vision was able to see the front of the Palace. A large body of horses stamped and snorted in the street; men passed in and out of the bar. After a while heavily armed riders swung leisurely to the saddle and lounged at ease.

Lee was astounded at the number of men and bitterly cursed Cameron. Taking no chance this time, he had augmented his gun crew with riffraff from the saloons.

Full night settled down with the horses champing their bits im-

patiently, their riders smoking and talking. Then Cameron came out of the hotel with Moccasin, and they stepped aboard their mounts. Cameron himself was going to see that the massacre was complete. He looked over the riders complacently, nodded and kicked his horse into action. The large body of horsemen swung in behind him and they moved slowly down the street toward the road which led to the near-by hills.

It was somewhere around an hour after the body of horsemen had left town that the outer door of the jail was again flung open. Lee whirled toward the corridor, his eyes straining to identify the man who walked toward the cell block.

"Trawick?" the man called guardedly.

"Thank God, Mulvey!" Lee burst out hoarsely. "There's a lamp on the desk there. Hurry, man!"

Frank struck a match, applied it to the lamp and turned toward Lee. "I heard they jailed you this afternoon," he said.

"That doesn't matter!" Lee whipped out. "Get your horse, Frank, and ride to the Basin. Tell Jeff not to try to take the oil out tonight!"

"You're sure worked up," Frank said indifferently. "Is Jeff plannin' to take out oil?"

"Yeah. He and the hands are going to haul in wagons and buckboards. But Cameron is setting an ambush on the road. For God's sake——"

"So that was what that army rode out of town for," Frank reflected. "I reckon the Block J is likely to get wiped out. I've been havin' sort of hard going lately, Trawick. What's it worth to you if I take word to the Basin?"

"With men about to be murdered you talk about money! What sort of a man——"

"Cut out the preachin'!" Frank snarled. "Jeff gave you half the Basin. Give me your half and I'll go. It's a deal between you and me and you never tell anybody the why of it. I'll take yore word."

Lee stared at the man, seeing him for the grasping weakling that he was but knowing he could do nothing about it. His share in the Basin was a small price to pay for the lives of everybody there. He nodded and said, "I've learned a lot today and now you pick a time like this to drive a coyote bargain——"

"Shut up!" Frank rasped. "I'll give you one minute to close the deal."

He pulled his watch out and held it before him. A short length of chain dangled from the watch. Lee's eyes squeezed to slits when he saw it; without saying anything he felt in his pocket for the length of chain he had forgotten. His face craggy, he wordlessly extended the piece.

Frank jerked up his hand and stared. "Where did you get it?"

"Off the derrick," Lee said. "After the nitroglycerin was planted last night."

"So that's where I lost it. I wondered." Frank dropped the watch back into his pocket. "That changes everything, I reckon."

"You tried to kill us all," Lee said. "You sold out to Cameron."

"What d'you aim to do about it?" Frank said. "You've balked me from the time you hit this country, Trawick. Sure, I sold out to Cameron. It was me told him about Jeff movin' his herd the first night you was in the Basin. It was me gave out the word that set the gun trap in the Longhorn when you nearly got killed. I've kept Cameron up on things all along. If you'd been out of the way things around here would have ended up different."

"You're through in this country, Mulvey."

"Sure, I'm through," Frank snarled. "But so are you and I'll come out ahead. It's too bad you can't use what you know, ain't it? I hate ranchin' and another country will look just as good to me as this. I'll be gone when daylight comes. Jeff and his men bein' away from the Basin and gettin' ambushed just fixes everything, and you're where you can't lift a finger. So long, Trawick. I wish I could see yore face tomorrow when you find out what's happened."

Frank left the jail hurriedly and in a few minutes was riding toward the Basin to put the crowning touch to his acts of treachery.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE afternoon had been one of terrific activity in the Basin. Jeff had just finished sending out riders to the surrounding ranches and was standing with Jean at the corral when Lovelace and Linda rode up. Lovelace introduced the girl to the old rancher and Jean.

"I hope you won't think we are just barging in on you here, Mr. Mitchell. Lee insisted that we come here for the time being."

"Glad to have you," Jeff said cordially. "Where's Lee? Do you know if he got them barrels?"

"Yes, he got them. They ought to get to the well before long." Lovelace frowned. "Lee won't be along for a while. But it's nothing serious, I think."

"What?" Jeff asked sharply.

"I was taking Linda away and her father objected. Lee helped me get her out of the hotel."

"You—you and Linda?" Jean cried, and a sudden rush of color suffused her face. But she gave a little laugh and put her arms around Linda. At once the girls were friends.

"Lee had gun trouble inside the hotel," Lovelace went on gravely,

"but he wasn't hurt. He did say he might be delayed. I wouldn't have left him, only he said it was more important for me to come on here. He said to freight the oil out tonight whether he was here or not, Mr. Mitchell."

"Jeff," Jean cried, "you'd better ride in and see——"

"I don't think there's any need to worry," Lovelace interrupted. "If any man in the world can take care of himself that man is Lee Trawick."

"Lovelace is right," Jeff decided. "If Lee said to go ahead with the haul that's what we'll do."

Jean was not entirely satisfied, but there seemed to be nothing to do for the time being. She hooked her arm through Linda's and led her toward the house. As Lovelace and Jeff unsaddled the horses the rancher said worriedly, "You're sure Lee wasn't in a bad jam?"

"No, I'm not sure," Lovelace answered honestly. "But I'm sure he meant what he said when he told me to get you word to haul the oil out regardless. That's the only reason I left him. If that's what he wants we'd better look after that before doing anything else."

"I reckon," Jeff grunted. "I'm goin' down to the well to lend a hand."

"I'll go with you," Lovelace said quickly.

They swung down the slope toward the well and as soon as they got through the trees they saw teamsters throwing off barrels in a big heap. They quickened their pace and were close to the well when Big Tim O'Casey saw them.

"Leave it to that bucko, Trawick, to fix things!" the Irishman yelled triumphantly. "We'll fill all the barrels we can haul before dark."

The crew at the well was shorthanded because Jeff had had to send off more than half the men after wagons. When Jeff tossed his vest to one side Lovelace pulled off his broadcloth coat and, over Jeff's protestations, went to work, too, filling the barrels with oil.

Throughout the afternoon the makeshift crew worked, sweated, grunted and cursed at top speed. In no time they were covered from head to foot with oil.

While the number of filled barrels were becoming ever greater wagons pulled into the Basin at regular intervals. At Jeff's orders they were unhitched behind the barn to attract as little attention as possible. A puncher would pull in with a wagon, unhitch the horses, catch up a fresh pair and ride off again. There were only a half-dozen ranches within reach of the Block J, but each one had a wagon and one or more buckboards.

By late afternoon all the rolling stock that was to be had was lined up behind the barn. The men turned the horses into the corral and without pause went down to the well to pitch into the work there. The arrival of fresh hands increased the tempo of work, so that barrels

rolled in an endless stream to and away from the well. Finally, darkness settle dover the Basin.

"Time we go up and eat," Jeff grunted. "Any of you men just want to stay here you can."

"The next time I meet up with a cow," a puncher said plaintively, "I'm gonna try to kiss him."

"The way you smell a self-respectin' cow wouldn't let you get close to him," another puncher said disgustedly.

Jean was helping the cook in the cookshack, and Linda, strange as such work was to her, was doing what she could. When Jean first heard the approach of men she ran quickly to the door—the twentieth time she had done that in the last few hours. As soon as she realized the noise was made by the men coming from the well she turned away.

Linda was watching her. She said, "You're worried about Lee?"

"Yes. I wish he would come.

"You love him, don't you?"

"I—yes."

"Does he know?"

"He—he's never said anything."

"He will if he's got good sense"—Linda smiled—"and nobody ever rightly called him a fool. Stop worrying about him. He'll be along and feel embarrassed that anybody thought he couldn't take care of himself."

The men, tired and hungry, stormed into the cookshack. When Linda saw Lovelace she involuntarily gasped. "I thought I wouldn't marry a gambler," she said. "Now I'm not so sure. It looks as though I'm marrying an oil mucker."

"You are," Lovelace answered, smiling.

It didn't take the men long to finish all the food in sight. Jeff let them take a full hour to rest. It was only when he sensed a growing restlessness among them that he stood up. "All right, boys," he said. "We've wagons and buckboard enough for every man to drive one. Wear yore guns and carry rifles between your knees. Pick out yore teams now and hitch up. Drive in a line down to the well and we'll all load the wagons and pull out together. We're goin' round Black Rock and don't make any noise while we're doin' it. I'll drive the first wagon and everybody keep close. Let's go now."

The men filed out, fully aware of the danger of the haul but eager to get on with it. Jeff turned to Lovelace, "You ain't used to the work you've done today," the rancher said kindly. "Why don't you stay here?"

"That depends on one thing," Lovelace replied. "Will the girls be safe here alone?"

"They won't be alone," Jeff said. "My foreman's been hurt but

he's up and around now. I aim to tell him to keep a sharp lookout. And if it comes to it them two busted-up punchers could pull a trigger. But nothin's gonna happen out here."

"Then I'll saddle up and ride with you till you make it around Black Rock. Then I'm going to slip into town and see what's happened to Lee."

"That's sort of dangerous."

"I'll feel better about it."

"All right, son. Right here I want to say somethin'. I hope you and the young lady will stay on here with us. You gave Lee the money for the barrels, didn't you?"

"Well—yes."

"I thought so. Then you've bought into the company."

"That's what Lee said," Lovelace replied with emotion. "I—it's not enough but—well, hell, I ought to have met up with men like you and Lee years ago."

Jeff grinned as Lovelace went over to have a few words with Linda. The rancher looked at Jean and said, "Don't worry, honey. Lee will be along."

"Or, I'll know why," Lovelace cut in quickly. "I'll bring you word before long, Jean."

"Thank you," Jean murmured. "We'll be waiting—Linda and I."

There were fourteen wagons that rattled out of the ranch yard. Jeff stopped his wagon beside the barrels and climbed down. Tim hurried up, closely followed by the men.

The men threw themselves into the work, and with two men to a barrel it wasn't too strenuous to heave it to the wagon bed. When Jeff's vehicle was loaded the barrels were lashed securely; the wagon pulled on ahead, and another took its place. Swiftly and silently the work went forward. When the last wagon was loaded Tim grinned.

"From first to last," he said, "this has been the damnedest oil crew I ever saw. We've dug and rigged and drilled and pumped and now, b'Jesus, we're haulin'."

The queer-looking caravan got under way. Jeff set a fast pace at first, for the hard upgrade through the mountains would be slow, torturous going.

As they approached the gap in the ridge Jeff called to Lovelace, riding at his hub, "You got a gun?"

"Yes," Lovelace answered. "Tim dug up one for me."

"Then suppose you ride on to the gap and see if the way's clear."

In a few minutes Lovelace was back. "I rode all the way through the gap. Didn't see or hear a thing," he reported.

"Good enough," Jeff answered.

The wagons entered the gap and passed through it. Ahead the

scattered lights of Black Rock showed redly, and there seemed to be a threat in their very existence. Jeff slowed up even more until he was scarcely moving. He came to a little-used trail and swung off the main road into it. Tense, every faculty alert, the men followed.

Jeff held to the slow pace and the back-trail until it began definitely to turn into an upgrade. Then he swung back and picked up the main road to the river just as it headed into the mountains.

"Made it!" Jeff yelled exultantly. "Got around town without raisin' a peep out of anybody."

"You're in the clear all right," Lovelace agreed in a low voice. "I'm going back now. Lee and I'll probably overtake you on the road."

"I hope so, son. Take care of yourself."

Lovelace pulled his horse around and headed back for Black Rock.

Frank Mulvey, from a hidden spot on the ridge, had watched the line of wagons leave the Basin. Throughout the loading of the vehicles he had sat his horse, endlessly smoking cigarettes with a sort of fatalistic patience. Even after the wagons had passed through the gap he continued to wait for another half-hour. He didn't want any of the Block J men close should anything go wrong with his plans.

At last he put his horse down the side of the ridge and headed toward the Block J ranch house. He rode leisurely across the Basin until he got within a short distance of the buildings. Then, to create an impression of urgent haste, he spurred his horse to a dead run and whirled up to the house in a shower of flying gravel.

"Jean!" he yelled. "Jean!"

The door to the living room swung open and the foreman stepped onto the porch with a cocked rifle in his hands. "Who's that?" he challenged.

"Frank Mulvey. Tell Jean to come out, quick!"

Jean ran out the door. Linda followed her closely.

"What is it, Frank?" Jean cried.

"It's about Trawick."

"What about him? He's not—"

"He ain't hurt if that's what's botherin' you." Frank could scarcely mask the venom in his voice. "I helped him get out of town."

"Where is he?" Jean exclaimed hurriedly.

"I got him hid out west of town. It may be he'll have to quit the country, but he wouldn't go till he'd seen you."

"Just as quickly as I can put on a riding skirt we'll go—"

"Cameron's men are scouring the country for him," Frank said quickly. "That's why I dassant bring him here. Look. You ride on up to my place and wait. I'll get Trawick and bring him there."

"Thank you, Frank," Jean said sincerely. "Will you catch me up a horse while I change?"

"And catch me one," Linda said. "I'm going with Jean."

"Naw, you ain't," Frank answered shortly.

"But Jean can't ride alone—"

"She'll have to. Even if any of Cameron's men see her they won't bother her none. But they want you back in town and if they caught you together they'd likely take you both in."

"We can't let them take you, Linda," Jean said. "You stay here with Mose and the boys. I'll be all right. Will you saddle for me, Frank?"

Frank was tightening the cinch to Jean's saddle when she burst out of the house and ran up.

"Lee isn't hurt, is he?" she asked again.

"I said he wasn't," Frank snapped. "Let's ride. I got to go back through the gap to cut over to where I left Trawick. You get on up to the ranch and wait till we come. We got to come mighty easy so don't get yore dander up if it takes a little while."

Jean swung lightly to the saddle and said, "I can never thank you for what you've done, Frank."

"Maybe you can." The man grinned wolfishly in the dark. "But we'll talk about that later. I'll be seein' you."

Jean turned her horse toward the mesa and touched him into action. Frank watched her go, then swung up and headed for Black Rock. His spirits rose higher and higher as he rode. He had Jean where he could pick her up without trouble on his way out of the country, and there was just one thing he wanted—money. He knew where to get that, too, and though he hated to return to Black Rock that was a risk he had to take. That morning old Luke had the same as admitted that he had a cache. Within the hour Frank meant to have the old man's wealth. With plenty of money and Jean he would ride on to another range. Lee was in jail and the Block J would be wiped out, so there would be none to follow him.

CHAPTER XXIX

LEE had lost all track of time and all hope. It seemed hours since Cameron's murderous crew had ridden out of town. He had completely given up and was staring listlessly at the drab street when he saw a furtive figure slipping from shadow to shadow on the far boardwalk. He watched the figure for a while without its making any impression on his tortured mind. Then the man ran quickly through a patch of light and pressed against the building on the far side—and Lee shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Lovelace! Lovelace, here, for God's sake!"

Lovelace snapped up his head and swung it back and forth in an effort to determine the direction from which the voice had come.

"Here!" Lee shouted. "The jail!"

Lovelace darted across the street then and sped toward the jail. He leaped through the door, breathing hard, and panted, "You'll rouse the town, Lee!"

"There's not a Cameron man left in town," Lee whipped out. "Light the lamp on the desk. Are the wagons under way?"

"Sure." Lovelace laughed as the lamp flared and caught. "They're on the mountain road by now. We got around Black Rock without a soul knowing it."

"They already knew it," Lee said bitterly. "Cameron, Nells, the whole gun crew and a lot of other scum are waiting in ambush somewhere on the road!"

Lovelace's face blanched and he gasped, "God!"

"Shoot the lock off the door!" Lee said urgently. "Here, give me your gun! I'll do it! How many men went with the wagons!"

"The whole crew including Jeff and Tim," Lovelace answered, shoving his six-shooter through the bars. "There were fourteen wagons."

"And Cameron's got at least twenty-five men. Even if we get to the wagons before they're ambushed Cameron's crowd can pile down on us. I don't see a chance."

Lee smashed a shot against the lock. Two more and he kicked the cell door open, shoved the gun at Lovelace and leaped across the room to strap on his own belt and gun.

"What about the teamsters?" Lovelace yelled suddenly. "Nells has run roughshod over them and they hate him—"

"It's a chance," Lee answered grimly. "About the only chance we got. Come on!"

They ran through the door to the street. They crossed the street, fighting down the desire to run, and walked briskly to the Red Dog. The saloon was roaring at full blast when they pushed through the batwings. Moving restlessly among the men was Frisco Al Jennings, louder, larger and tougher than any of them.

It was he who first caught sight of Lee and Lovelace. "Here's the bucko," he roared, "who furnished the money to go on yore salaries, boys. Belly up, Trawick, you and yore friend! I'm buyin' the drinks."

The uproar subsided as the teamsters from all over the room looked around at the newcomers. Then the teamsters let out a roar that was meant to be a welcome as Jennings grinned widely.

"Maybe we'll end up haulin' oil for him," Jennings boomed good-naturedly. "He came to see me about it today. Chances are we'll get to workin' regular again, boys."

"Men," Lee said in a quiet voice, "what Jennings said is right. I'd

hoped to put you to work. Right now the chances don't look so good."

"Why in hell not?" Bull, a big teamster, bellowed.

"Because," Lee whipped out, "right now that same marshal you hate, along with Cameron and his whole crew of gunmen, is hid on the mountain road, waiting to ambush the Block J. The Basin is hauling its own oil tonight, trying to make a stake so we can hire you. Cameron and Nells hadn't the guts to fight it out with us face to face, so like the back-shooting snakes they are they threw me in jail and mean to wipe out the rest from ambush."

Lee paused and the saloon was hushed with a terrible quiet.

"You don't owe me or the Block J a thing," Lee went on, "but you're the only chance I've got to stop a massacre. We've all got the chance to give Cameron and Nells the gunning they've been asking for. If you don't want to ride with me I won't blame you. Jennings, you've got a business to look after and if you don't want to risk—"

"I do business in the daytime and I'll thank you to remember it!" Jennings roared. "At night I have my fun. Boys, here's our chance to pay off that murderin' marshal and that thievin' Cameron. Stay here and raise hell if you want to, but I'm ridin' with Trawick!"

For the space of half a dozen heartbeats there was no answer; then the teamsters let out a concerted roar. It was at once an offer of aid to Lee and a cry for vengeance against those whom they hated.

"There's yore answer, Trawick," Jennings boomed with a huge grin on his face. "You're the boss. What's next?"

"Get horses and look to your guns," Lee said. "There's not much time. "Let's go!"

Lee turned and led the way. Men spilled out of the Red Dog behind him. There were a few saddled horses on the street, and with permission from nobody they were quickly collected.

"Where's your horse, Don?" Lee called.

"On the edge of town," Lovelace answered. "I'll be back before you saddle."

Lee ran to the livery, hoping to find his horse there. Teamsters swarmed at his heels. The hostler warily got up out of a chair as they approached and called, "What's goin' on—"

"Is my horse here?" Lee snapped. "And how many more—"

"Yore horse is here all right," the hostler answer. "There's two dollars owed on him."

"I'll pay you tomorrow. How many—"

"You'll pay me now if you want to take 'im," the hostler stated grimly.

"Out of the way, old man," a teamster shouted. "How many more horses you got?"

The hostler read the temper of the men and shrugged resignedly.

"Cameron took about ever'thing I had. Ain't but four horses left besides this gent's."

"Then we'll have to have mules," Jennings shouted. "Get to the freight yard, boys, and throw saddles on them critters fast as you can. Get!"

The men turned and sped down the street. Jennings and three others, without another word to the livery man, entered the barn.

"You'll be paid for the rent of your horses," Lee said to the old man. "I'll see to it."

Then Lee hurried into the barn, found his horse and threw the saddle on him. When he led him out Jennings and the three teamsters were behind him. The half-dozen men who had collected horses on the street were already in the saddle before the Red Dog, and one of them was having a violent argument with the owner of the horse he had borrowed. The teamsters grinned hugely at the owner, and the latter realized he had no chance though he continued to argue on principle.

Lee stood beside his horse, taut and drawn as the seconds slipped by.

A hard-ridden horse whirled up the street and Lovelace joined the group before the Red Dog. Then a yell split the night, and the rest of the teamsters thundered into the street on long-legged mules. Lee swung to the saddle.

"Lead out," Jennings called. "Us boys are rarin' to go!"

Lee, with Lovelace beside him, swung out into the street. As the crowd from the freight yard galloped up Lee spurred his horse and the whole body leaped into movement. Lee threw one quick glance behind him and knew he had as tough a crew of fighting men as he could have wanted. Time was the important thing now—if they just had time!

The cavalcade pounded out of town and onto the mountain road. Lee was pushing his mount to the limit. The other horses kept at his heels, but the mules began to drop back.

The road twisted into the mountains, and the long, dangerous upgrade began. At first the road was wide enough, but as it wound higher it narrowed so that no more than two horsemen could ride abreast. In time it became little more than a trail, banked on one side by sheer walls, giving on the other to a deep, rock-studded chasm through which flowed Rocky Creek. And as the trail got steeper the staying quality of the mules became evident; they closed the gap caused by the first burst of speed and began to push the horses ahead.

A thin copper moon tipped the ridge and washed the mountains with a wan light.

With the help of the dim light Lee rode with increased recklessness, and the teamsters followed without hesitation. The sharp turns, the jutting rocks, the near lip of the canyon were common dangers in their

lives. As Lee flung his horse around one curve after another he expected at any moment to hear a salvo of gunfire ahead. The horses were laboring now, and the pace was gradually slowing down.

"How much farther, Jennings?" Lee shouted over his shoulder.

"Not far," the freighter yelled. "We're gettin' on close to the crest now."

Lee pulled out his gun and began to shoot it at regular intervals, hoping that the wagons would hear it and pull up to see what was wrong. Desperately Lee lifted his failing mount up the trail, firing again and again, hoping that Jeff would hear and understand.

Jeff did hear it finally but it was almost too late. His wagon was just reaching the crest of the grade where the road widened considerably, and it was there that the trap was laid. Cameron and Moccasin knew the wagons would be barely crawling after the long pull, and furthermore, they had had to find a place where they could get their horses off the trail and hide them. Just before the crest of the grade was reached a shallow canyon cut the cliff side of the road, and it was there the ambushers had hidden their mounts. Then they had gone on afoot to where the cliff flattened out to a bank no more than ten feet above the road.

Jeff was approaching the crest when he heard the shots behind him. He pulled up his team of horses and the line of wagons came to a stop. "What do you make of it, Tim?" Jeff called.

"It may be Cameron's hellions!" Tim answered.

"May be, but them shots are spaced like a signal. Maybe it's Lovelace or Lee. We better wait——"

"There's a whole bunch of horses comin'!" the puncher in the last wagon shouted excitedly.

"Then it is Cameron's gang!" Jeff exploded. "Off the wagons, men, we got to make a stand here before the road gets wider. When they come around that curve pour it to 'em."

The men leaped from their seats to the road. They tied the lines to the wagons and chocked the wheels with rocks, never letting go of their rifles as they watched the back trail from which a thunder of hoofs was now plainly audible. Jeff, his face grim, hurried toward the rear with Tim at his side.

"Stay close to the wagons," Jeff ordered the men, "and use the barrels for protection. We can pile this gang up before they know what struck 'em."

The men crowded close to the vehicles, guns ready and eyes straining for the first sight of the oncoming riders. A little further on along the bank above them Moccasin cursed viciously.

"A little more and they'd been in the jaws of the trap," he swore,

pulling out his guns. "But we can still wipe 'em out."

"Who do you suppose is coming?" Cameron asked bleakly.

"What does it matter?" Moccasin grinned. "We'll get them too. Come on, you birds. Move down until you're above them guys, then cut loose!"

Just them Lee's voice rode above the roll of hoofs: "Jeff, look out for an ambush! Get down behind the wagons!"

Moccasin snatched a rifle from a man beside him and threw a hate-inspired shot at Lee as he rounded the last curve. Short guns were Moccasin's weapons and he missed with the rifle, but that shot blew the lid off. The ambushers were already keyed to a high tension by the wait, and the explosion startled them into action. The reaction was a spasmodic tightening of trigger fingers which produced a ragged volley up and down the bank.

Several went down and the rest went mad from the crashing guns and the scent of blood. The animals reared and threshed to get clear of harness. One team got too near the lip of the canyon and plunged over. The tongue of the buckboard overturned, and its barrels smashed to pour a stream of oil across the road.

"Hang onto them horses!" Jeff bellowed. "Hang on and blast the bank above you!"

The ambushers, after that first nervous outburst, settled down to methodical shooting. Under the lashing tongue of Moccasin Nells they set a devastating rain of lead down into the road as they moved back along the bank to get into a position directly above the wagons. From the road and bank orange flame stabbed the night in breath-taking flashes. The roll of guns echoed and re-echoed off the mountainsides until it sounded as though hidden guns were speaking from every side.

Then Lee and his crowd were in it. Lee cut inside the wagons and, keeping close to the bank itself for protection, swept past the chaos in the road to the crest of the hill, the teamsters recklessly following. At the top of the grade the vertical face of the bank became nothing more than a steep pitch, and Lee sent his floundering horse straight at it. The nearest ambushers divined his intention and frantically turned their guns in that direction. Lead whined and thudded about the crest of the hill.

"They'll cut us down if we try to get up here, Trawick!" Jennings roared. "On up the road a hundred yards the bank plays out!"

Lee had already seen that the price of charing the bank on flagging horses might be too high, and the freighter's words presented a God-given alternative. He whirled his horse on up the road and his men swept after him. At first the ambushers thought they had turned back the assault, and they jubilantly fired after the receding horsemen.

Then a saloon hanger-on saw the body of horsemen turn off the road

at the beginning of the bank and head back. "They're up here with us!" he cried. "They'll ride us down!"

Consternation struck the ambushers as they realized that it was now they who were at a dangerous disadvantage and they ran for the horses.

"Damned two-bit cowards!" Cameron grated.

"This time they're right," Moccasin answered, his smile thin as the two guns jumped like striking snakes in his hands. "On foot we can't stand against a horseback charge. We better get out of here."

"If they get this oil through——"

"They're honin' for fight. They'll follow us, I think. We can hole up in town and pick 'em off from now on."

"All right. You handle it."

Moccasin called to the men. They emptied their guns at the oncoming riders, causing it to break out of the compact body it was. Then Moccasin motioned to the gunmen, and they ran toward the small canyon where they'd left their horses.

At a signal from Lee the teamsters leaped their mounts forward, raking the bank where the ambushers had been with a deadly fire. They rode low in the saddle, triggering as fast as they could and, when they drew no return, searching the shadows for running figures.

"Hold up!" Lee shouted, pulling his horse in. "They may be setting another trap."

At that moment Cameron's crowd burst from the canyon onto the main road below the wagons. The Block J men heard them and sent lead winging after them, but within twenty feet of the canyon offshoot the trail curved and offered protection. The abrupt end to exploding guns caused the drumming horses' hoofs to sound unnaturally loud as the ambushers pounded down the trail to Black Rock.

"Their horses were behind us," Jennings roared wrathfully. "They're headin' for town."

"Won't do 'em any good," Lee answered grimly. "This thing's in the open now and we're going to finish it. You men feel the same way?"

"Hell, yes," a teamster snorted. "I want to get them tough gun hands where they can't run."

The rest of the freighters were of the same mind so Lee said, "All right. But my horse is nearly done. How are the mules?"

"Ain't worked up a good lather yet," a mule rider boasted.

"Then listen," Lee said. "Jennings, will you take a mule and lead the men that are riding them after that crowd? Don't get close enough to mix it; just drive 'em to cover somewhere and keep 'em interested till the rest of us get there. We'll straighten out the tangle on the road while our horses get a blow; then we'll come ahead."

Before Lee was through speaking Jennings had dispossessed a man of his mule and climbed aboard. "These flop-ears'll run the legs off

them horses going downhill." The freighter grinned. "We'll run them dogs to cover all right. Let's go, boys."

"Don't tangle with 'em," Lee repeated.

Jennings nodded and put his mule down the bank to the road. The eight or ten men mounted on mules followed, and once past the wagons the sure-footed beasts stretched out in a lope that fairly ate up the ground. In almost no time they had disappeared down the trail.

Lee and the rest of the men rode down off the bank, climbed off their mounts and loosened the cinches to give the horses a good blow. Already the Block J men were straightening out the confusion of horses, wagons and harness.

"Where's Jeff?" Lee called.

"Down here," Tim answered from the lower end of the line.

Something in the Irishman's voice caused Lee to hurry toward him but as he passed he said to the Block J hands, "Scotch the wagons and unhitch a horse to ride. Cameron started this but we're finishing it. We'll be ready to ride in a minute."

"Can't be too soon for me," a puncher growled. "The low-down, back-shootin' sons!"

Lee hurried on and when he saw Tim leaning over a man stretched on the ground he began to run. The man was Jeff, and Lee knew a moment of terrible fear and anger. "So they got Jeff," he said harshly as he ran up. "They'll pay, so help me——"

"He ain't dead," Tim broke in gruffly. "I don't know how bad he's hurt."

As if in answer Jeff opened his eyes and rolled over. He wiped the blood out of his eyes and as the bullet shock passed he began to swear. From the power of his voice it was evident he was madder than he was hurt. Lee struck a match and saw that a slug, probably a ricochet, had furrowed the side of his head.

"Sit still, Jeff," Lee said. "I'll tie up your head and you take it easy up here till we finish this business."

"Like hell!" Jeff roared. "I went down just as them snakes broke for cover. Why ain't you followin' 'em, Lee?"

"I've sent men to run 'em to cover. The rest of us are going in a minute. But you'd better——"

"Get me a horse! I'm gonna be in on the finish of this. No skunk can cut down on me from ambush and get away with it."

The old man was on his feet and Lee saw that he was all right. Lee and Tim almost had to hold him to tie up the shallow wound. Then Lee found two punchers who had been hit and over their protestations ordered them to stay with the wagons.

As he turned toward his horse he found Lovelace beside him. "All right, Don?" Lee asked.

"Sure." Lovelace laughed easily. "Anxious to get on with the rest of it."

"We can go now," Lee said. He raised his voice to a shout: All right, men. It will be easy going down but there's no need to go back like we came up. We'll take it easy till we get to town."

The men went quickly to their horses, and under cover of the confusion Lee gave Jeff his saddled horse in such a way that the old rancher didn't realize he was being favored. Lee straddled one of the wagon horses and led out down the trail at a jog, the line of men strung out behind him.

As they whirled into Black Rock's main street Cameron yelled, "Where to, the Palace?"

"No," Moccasin flung back, "an open building—the freighters' headquarters will do it."

"But the hotel is brick."

"It's too big to hold. Some of that gang might get inside and there'd be hell to pay."

The sound of guns had driven everyone off the street. They reached the building the freight outfit used and hit the ground at full speed. In a wild scramble the gunmen rushed inside while their frightened horses plunged on out of the way. Swiftly the men barricaded front and back doors, threw what protection they could under the windows and spread out to cover every available opening.

It was some time later that Cameron discovered Moccasin had flung his horse into the alley as they were dismounting and was not in the building.

Close on the heels of the gun crew Jennings led his small contingent into town. "Damn 'em, they're holin' up in our buildin'," the teamster, Bull, shouted.

"It don't matter," Jennings answered. "Bull, you take half the boys around to the back. Get under cover and shoot jest enough to let 'em know they're covered. The rest of us'll do the same from the front. When Trawick and his gang get here I reckon we'll storm the place."

Bull split off half the men and they turned into an alley to get to the rear of the freight building. Jennings, followed by the other men, quit the saddle and slapped the mules to send them on out of the way; then they, too, plunged into an alley to race along behind buildings until they got opposite the freight headquarters. There they separated and ran down several alleys to cover the front of the besieged building from as many angles as possible.

Black Rock looked like the ghost city it had once been, for not a human being showed on the street and a vast quiet hovered over it. The quiet was abruptly shattered when Bull and his men opened up

at the rear and those with Jennings followed suit. The besieged men answered with a vengeance. Lead smashed into the wooden building, but the men inside were protected against such sparse shooting and they raked the alleys with searcing slugs or sent swift shots at every gun flash they saw. But after the first outburst the shooting fell off and settled into occasional sniping.

Lee heard the shooting before he reached town and increased the pace of his horse. When he and the men swung off the trail for the short run to town they lifted their mounts to a gallop. Jeff and Lovelace pulled up on either side of Lee.

"Sounds like Jennings ran 'em to cover all right," Lovelace called out.

Lee nodded and when they reached the head of the street where he could see the gun flashes he said, "They're in the freight building." He help up his hand and brought the body to a halt. "Climb out of the saddle men. We go the rest of the way on foot."

While the men were dismounting Jennings, having heard them coming, loomed out of the darkness. "All right so far, Trawick," the freighter said. "Some of the boys are around back, some in front. What's the next move?"

"Let's rush the dirty sons!" Jeff roared. "Let's smoke 'em out——"

"Too many men will get killed," Lee said quietly, "and there's no use in it. There's just one thing. The sheriff will be along in the morning. What will he do?"

"Then there's no use to get our men killed. We can pour lead into that building till hell freezes."

Calmly as though he were sending men on roundup, Lee divided his forces. He asked Jeff to take a group to the rear of the building and cover it thoroughly. He gave Jennings a number of men to lead to the roofs of buildings across from the besieged building: lead sent down from that angle would penetrate above barricades set up inside.

"Lovelace and the rest of us will reinforce the men on the street," Lee finished. "There's just one more thing. Don't cut loose till I give the signal. I'd like to stop this if I can. I'm going to give Cameron the chance to throw down his guns and come out."

"The hell you are!" Jeff blazed. "They didn't give us a chance."

"We're not them," Lee said quietly. "If they'll get out of the country there won't be any need for a slaughter. That's all we want, isn't it, Jeff?"

"You're right, Lee," the rancher acknowledged gruffly. "One of these men is worth the whole crowd. If they'll quit the country let 'em go."

The men split up then and went to carry out their assignments. Lee, accompanied by Lovelace, led his contingent along behind the buildings until they were opposite the freight headquarters where he placed the men at advantageous spots along a wide front. Jennings had found

a shed which gave easy access to a roof and was leading his men up. Lee gave them time to get placed before walking to the mouth of an alley directly across the street from the freighters'. He edged in behind a rain barrel, then straightened up and shouted.

"Cameron, hold up a minute. Cameron, this is Trawick." The spasmodic shooting broke off, and in the deathly quiet Lee's voice carried up and down the street. He called again: "Cameron!"

After a moment Cameron's metallic voice answered, "Well, what is it?"

"We've got you surrounded," Lee called. "You haven't a chance. There's no use to finish this, Cameron. Throw down your guns and we'll let you come out."

Again there was a pause before Cameron answered. He said, "Maybe you have got us surrounded, Trawick, but what good will it do you? We can hold you off forever. But go ahead; what's the rest of it?"

"That you and your men will quit the country!"

Cameron's answer was a taunting laugh. A gun exploded and the bullet slapped into the barrel before Lee.

"Hold it!" Lee shouted. "That's your answer, Cameron. What about you men? If you want to come out we'll give you the chance."

"If one of them did I'd shoot him down before he crossed the street," Cameron jeered. "But none of them wants to. Give him your answer, men."

A dozen guns roared as Lee jerked back to the protection of the wall beside him. Lead screamed through the alley and the barrel thumped hollowly time and again. But that volley took the place of the signal Lee was to have given. The teamsters and the Block J men let go. And the besieged men answered shot for shot—this was the showdown.

CHAPTER XXX

OF all those affected by the fight raging in Black Rock none were more vitally concerned than the two men trapped in old Luke's underground room beneath the besieged building.

Black Rock had been quiet as a tomb when Frank slipped back into town after sending Jean to his ranch. But he had just hidden his horse when the teamsters stormed out of the Red Dog. Frank hid quickly and for an interminable time it seemed men were running all over town. At last things quieted down and Frank looked out to see the group of riders heading out toward the mountains. He didn't know what to make of it and the sight frightened him. He remained hidden for some time longer before he worked up courage enough to proceed with his plans.

Finally he slipped to the rear of the freight building and into the back room. He lifted the bunk and found the trap door as Luke had said. Then he pulled his gun and jerked the door wide.

Old Luke gaped up fearfully from the room below. Frank chuckled brutally, stepped onto the ladder and pulled the door down on top of him. When he saw who was descending the ladder Luke let out an explosive breath.

"For God's sake, Frank," he said, "you sure gave me a scare there for a minute. I thought you was some of Cameron's gang. You're welcome, boy, but you sure nobody saw you come down here?"

"Nobody saw me." Frank looked around the room. "Nice quiet little spot. Nobody'd ever find it."

"That's right," Luke agreed proudly. "Built 'er myself. You can put yore gun up down here. What's goin' on?"

"Maybe I better not put my gun up till I tell you. I've decided to leave the country, but I need a little money. You're goin' to lend it to me."

"Me?" Luke asked, puzzled. "Shore, Frank, I'd lend you some if I had it. Trouble is——"

"Quit stallin'," Frank snarled. "This mornin' you the same as admitted you had a cache. Whether it's dust or money I'm takin' it and I'm in a hurry. It'll go easier with you if you shake a leg."

Luke realized then what Frank was. The old man looked at the gun trained on him and bit out. "You low-down, back-stabbin' sidewinder! Where's Lee at?"

"In jail," Frank snapped. "And the Block J will be wiped out before mornin'. I just wish I was gonna be around to see it."

And we thought you was one of us. I reckon you've sold us out more'n once, you damn Judas. Where's Jean?"

"Never mind about her. Where's that cache?"

"I love that gal like a daughter. Anything happens to her somebody'll pay. Maybe I got a cache and maybe I ain't, but if you think I'm gonna help you get out of the country you got another think comin'."

"You gonna hand over that cache or get a bullet in the guts," Frank said brutally.

"Shoot and be damned to you. You'd likely murder me anyhow if I did give you somethin'."

For an hour Frank swore, bullied, wheedled and threatened, but old Luke only taunted him. And then booted feet slapped the boards above them; weights were dragged across them, and soon guns began to roar. Frank lifted a white face to the trap door and snarled, "Some gang has holed up in here. Wonder if it's the freighters."

Keeping his gun trained on Luke, he climbed up the ladder and listened at the trap door.

"It's Cameron and his men!" he jerked out as he came down the ladder. "It must be Trawick is out of jail and has driven Cameron to cover! I got to get out of here!"

"Go on up and join Cameron." Luke chuckled. "You're his stripe. Course Lee would ketch up with you sooner or later——"

"Shut up!" Frank snarled. "Is there another way out of these damn tunnels?"

"All depends," Luke said. "If I showed you a way out what would you do next?"

Frank hurried across the room and flung open the door that gave onto the shaft. The tunnels were dark and forbidding, and the odor of oil thickened their dankness. The rancher hadn't the courage to risk getting lost in that maze of passages. He turned back to the room and resumed his threats, fear lending a hysterical menace to his voice. Luke let him shout himself hoarse, but when the salvo above signaled the arrival of Lee and his men the old prospector realized that fear and desperation had driven Frank close to the edge and he couldn't be stalled any longer.

Luke waited till the concerted boom of guns diminished somewhat, then said, "There's a way out, Frank. I wouldn't tell you, only I know you got to head out of this country fast as you can. Lee'll kill you for double-crossin' him."

"Quit gabbin'," Frank cried frenziedly. "How do I get out of here?"

"Turn left out that door and follow the main tunnel to the end. Turn left there and you'll come out on a hill above town."

Frank laughed. "I'll come out ahead yet. Maybe I haven't got any money but I've got Jean. You want to know where she it? She's waitin' for me at my ranch. I tricked her and I'll trick her again. She's leavin' the country with me. She's one thing Trawick wanted he won't get."

"He'll track you to hell," Luke said, realizing he had made a mistake.

"Not with the start I'll have," Frank said. "My trail will be cold before he ever starts on it."

"And I told you how to get out of here." Luke was quiet a moment, then said gently, "Well, I don't mind dyin'. Jean's too fine a gal for a snake like you—and Lee sided me the first day he rid into town." The old man looked about him and smiled wistfully while Frank regarded him warily. Luke went on. "The tunnels here have been my home for ten years. I don't mind stayin' down here among 'em from now on. Naw, I don't mind a-tall. I'm an old man and this is home."

Old Luke suddenly stabbed for the gun he had inside his shirt. Frank, watching him like a hawk, triggered his gun. The slug caught Luke in the chest and slammed him back against the wall. Twice more Frank

shot the old man. He began to slip down the wall as his gun came clear and slowly he raised it. Frank laughed fiendishly when Luke couldn't get the gun lined on him, but all at once the old man's face broke into a gentle smile. He had the gun lined on the stacked boxes of dynamite. He squeezed the trigger.

Lee was trying to get to a more advantageous position from which to shoot when a devastating earthquake seemed to take Black Rock in its teeth and shake it. The roar of that blast was heard for ten miles. The freighters' building exploded: the walls went out with a rending crash; the roof leaped straight up, hesitated a moment, then smashed down.

Every building in town was shaken to its foundations, and shattering glass tinkled weirdly in the wake of that deafening explosion.

Lee picked himself up and found Lovelace beside him. "Luke's dynamite," Lee said. "He sure settled with Cameron for fair."

"God!" Lovelace said shakenly.

A frightful red glare shot up through the dust of the collapsed building. "Luke had a drum of coal oil down there," Lee said. "We'd better see if there are any men left alive in that wreckage."

It was Lee who came upon the mess that had been Stuart Cameron, caught at last in the coils of his own inhumanity.

Fire shot through the floor and Lee shouted to his men. They barely got clear before the wreckage burst into flames all at once. And suddenly at the edge of town a great tongue of flame leaped a hundred feet into the air and was soon joined by a second and a third. The dynamite blast had drenched the timbers of the old Dover tunnel with coal oil, and in no time the oil that Luke had diverted into the tunnel was ablaze. After that the fire had got into the wells themselves through the breaks in the shafts.

Everybody in Black Rock ran toward the wells to be met by a sweeping wave of intense heat.

"The whole town's going!" Lee shouted. "There's nothing anybody can do. Back up, men!"

The solid ranks of men gave ground grudgingly, seemingly hypnotized by the unconquerable sweep of the flaming wells. It was Jenning's bull-like voice which broke the spell.

"Get to the wagon yard, you shavetail mule skinners!" he roared at the teamsters. "Hitch the rest of the mules to the wagons and pull away from town. If we lose so much as a jerk line I'll take it out of yore hides!"

He broke for the wagon yard while teamsters throughout the crowd hurled men out of their way and charged after him. Their action reminded others of their possessions, and the crowd broke up into a con-

fused mass of running, shoving men intent on saving what they could from the onward rush of the fire. They stormed up the street, businessmen and shopkeepers pleading for help to remove their stock and fixtures. No one paid them any attention, and in a few moments it was apparent even to them that the most any man could hope for was to get out with a few personal possessions. Building after building was catching fire as angry flames swept up Black Rock's main street.

Lee saw Jeff and his punchers working their way toward the upper end of town to look for their horses. He caught up with them and said, "The four men who were in that building. We'll have to take them to the rise above town where they'll be out of it."

They came to the alley were the injured men had been left. Lee directed the punchers to take doors off their hinges to use as stretchers, and when they had been procured the four men were lifted to the boards. As Lee was straightening up with the corner of one door he stopped suddenly to listen.

"What is it, Lee?" Jeff asked.

"I thought I heard a shot."

"Hot as it is," a puncher said, "the shells in my belt will soon be goin' off."

"Probably just a timber cracking," Lee muttered. "Let's go."

As gently as possible they carried the injured men toward the safety of the incline above town and other men fell in behind them.

Lee stopped on the crest of the small hill and the growing crowd behind him stopped with him.

Lovelace came over and stood beside Lee. At last he said, "Looks like this about winds it up."

"Looks like it." Lee nodded.

Then, as if the gods were bent on mockery, Moccasin Nells stepped around the corner of the Palace into the center of the wide street. His white horse was stamping fearfully in the alley but he wouldn't have long to wait, for Moccasin was ready to ride on. He had tricked Cameron into passing up the Palace to make his last stand because Moccasin wanted the safety of the Palace for himself. He had gained its shelter before the siege began and from within had watched the progress of the fight. When the explosion came and the fire he knew it was all over and Black Rock could hold nothing more for him. He had made one final effort to keep from having to leave empty-handed, and in the end Diamond Delaney had balked him. But such was Moccasin's will to destroy that, though it would gain him nothing, he meant to finish Lee before he rode on. Moccasin knew Lee wouldn't meet him, but they alone knew why; and if Moccasin branded Lee a coward before that vast throng he would be irrevocably ruined.

With the fire roaring at his back Moccasin lifted his smiling face

toward the crowd and called, "Is Lee Trawick up there?"

"Here," Lee answered.

"I'm ridin' on," Moccasin called, "but before I go I want every man there to know you for a yellow dog you are. If you got the guts come down and meet me man to man."

An electric tension ran through the crowd. Lee stiffened and looked down at the mocking face below. Lovelace put a hand on his arm and said, "Don't let him goad you into anything you'll regret, Lee."

"I won't regret it," Lee said quietly. "I realized this afternoon that he ought to be killed the same as a mad dog. I should've done it years ago and a lot of good men would still be alive. But I could never bring myself to it. Moccasin is my half brother."

"I'll go down for you," Lovelace offered.

"You wouldn't stand a chance. He's fast and he likes to kill. I tried to straighten him out but he's all bad. He's still my responsibility—and he's a cold-blooded murderer.

Lee began to walk slowly forward. He walked on down to the head of the street, and it seemed to the breathless spectators that he barely moved. Moccasin stood waiting in the glare of the fire, his smile wolfish and vindictive. When he reached the front of the Palace Lee stopped.

"What kind of a play is this?" Moccasin grinned.

"This is it, Moccasin," Lee said quietly. "The law has never been able to touch you and you didn't think I would. You're a rotten killer and your mother would rather have you dead than going on living the way you are. I know that now."

For the first time in anybody's knowledge the smile was wiped off Moccasin Nells's face. For a moment incredulity was registered there; then his expression froze into slit-eyed hate. Suddenly he struck for his guns! He was fast—terribly fast—with both hands. The tense spectators couldn't even see his hands move until firelight glinted on his guns as they swept up. There were those who said Lee must have already had his gun out, for they couldn't follow his draw at all. But they saw flame spurt from his fist; they saw Moccasin stagger back; they saw both his guns go off, and they saw Lee stalking forward, thumbing shot after shot.

Finally Lee stopped and dropped his arm. Pain etched deep lines in his face as he muttered, "It ought not to have ended this way. There ought to have been some other out."

Moccasin teetered on unsteady legs and mumbled, "Fast . . . fast . . . I always wondered who . . . was the fastest. . . . I . . . found out." He pitched forward on his face.

Lee looked down at him and said tonelessly, "I reckon that finishes it." He turned at a slight noise. "Is that you, Don?"

"Just in case you needed me," Lovelace answered quietly.

Beside them the far wall of the Palace caught fire. In one great sweep flames raced through the bar and shot up through the roof. Lee turned his head slowly and stared at the doomed building.

He stirred and said, "Have you seen Diamond?"

"No."

"We'd better take a look."

They entered the office and just within the door came to a stop. Diamond Delaney was sprawled back against his safe, his arms spread as though even in death he would defend his money. A small blue-edged hole was in the center of his forehead; a few tiny bright beads were on the floor before him.

"Moccasin," Lee said slowly. "I reckon Diamond wouldn't open up the safe for him."

"We'd better go, Lee," Lovelace said. "It would be better all around if Diamond were just left here."

Lee nodded. "He staked everything here and lost. I think he'd want to stay. Yes, we can go now. Black Rock and all it stood for are gone."

CHAPTER XXXI

IN the bright light of a new day a small group stood on the ridge south of town. The Block J and its friends were facing the future. Below them Cameron's wells still burned fiercely, sending up great volumes of smoke. But Black Rock had been leveled to the ground.

The exodus had already begun. Boom-town riffraff, merchants, prospectors, gamblers, barmen, adventurers and the moneyed men of the Palace were heading out in long lines, traveling by horse, in buckboards and buggies or by foot.

Two groups were left—the freighters and the Polacks. The Polacks stood in a pitiable group watching the wells burn, strangers in a strange land, without friends, without funds. The freighters were grazing their mules.

On the ridge the sheriff had just finished talking with Jeff. Tim and the Block J punchers stood to one side looking at the burning wells. Lovelace and Linda, Lee and Jean, stood together, content not to talk, for it seemed words were inadequate after all that had happened.

In the early hours before dawn Lee and Don had headed for the Block J and on the way had met Jean and Linda. Jean had quit the mesa when she heard the explosion and, wildly worried, the girls had started for town. When they met Jean had come straight to Lee's arms and in time had told him of Frank Mulvey's visit. With what he already knew of the man's duplicity Lee had guessed his intentions. And in the first light of day the story had been completed. Lee had worked

his way down to Luke's underground room: there had been nothing left of a human being, but there was a charred cowman's boot and near it a blackened, twisted watch with a short length of chain. What had happened in that room none would ever know, but that Frank Mulvey had paid for the betrayal of his friends was plain enough.

The sheriff was preparing to leave the ridge.

"You goin' to the county seat?" Jeff asked.

"Yes," the sheriff answered. "Unless you think you might need me here."

"I don't need you," Jeff grunted. "But if you'll do me a favor I might—I just said might—vote for you next election. Send over the sky pilot from the county seat. We'll be needin' him."

"I'll do that," the sheriff said, kneeing his horse into motion.

Jeff looked around. "There's so damn much to be done," he said tiredly. "If we just had some money!"

"The way is clear for you to sell the Basin at a big profit, Jeff," Lee said. "You sure you want to stay in the oil business?"

"Why, hell, yes! You think I'd go through what's happened here, then turn it over to somebody else?" The old rancher's eyes twinkled. "Besides, I like it."

"I just wanted to be sure," Lee grinned. "And you, Don?"

"I'd like to work with you." Lovelace frowned. "I can't accept an interest——"

"Tell them, Lee," Jean said.

Lee extended a package toward Don and Linda. "Luke gave me this to keep for him," he said. "It's twenty thousand dollars he took from Cameron, but it was Diamond Delaney's money. Here's the note Cameron signed for it. So the money belongs to Linda, or I reckon I'm right in saying both of you. Jeff, what do you say?"

"I say the Basin is owned by three equal partners," Jeff stated promptly. "The oil company will be called Mitchell, Trawick and Lovelace. Shut up, Don, I ain't lettin' that money out of my sight, bad as we need it. I'm goin' right down to see that Jennings hellion—I can go for a man what feeds him mules when he ain't got nothin' to eat himself—and arrange for freighting. I'll have him pick up the stuff we left on the road and by the time that's delivered there'll be more to haul. We'll put down another well right off. Tim!"

The Irishman walked over to join the group, and the punchers followed.

"Tim, we're goin' to sink another well soon as possible," Jeff said. "How soon can you leave for the Coast to buy drillin' junk?"

"Soon as I get my coffee," Tim answered promptly.

"No use to be in that much of an all-fired hurry," Jeff said. "Come to think about it, I reckon I better go along to keep an eye on you.

We'll get things to runnin' smooth here, then leave Don and Lee to look after——"

"Wait a minute, Jeff," Lee interrupted. "Jean and I——"

"You think I'm blind?" the old rancher snapped, but his face broke into a smile. "I know about you and Jean. I already got a sky pilot on the way."

The men laughed and Lee grinned. But when they had quieted he said, "I came into this country looking for cow range. I'm still looking for it."

"You mean you're throwin' us over?" Jeff growled.

"I'm a cowman, damn it." Lee grinned. I'm going to arrange with the courts to buy in Mulvey's spread up on the mesa. You and Don can run the oil business; I'm going to run cows."

"If you ain't goin' no further off than that all right," Jeff agreed. "But you're still a partner. If you want to put yore profits in cows it suits me. You're old-fashioned, Lee. Me, I'm twice yore age but I take to new things."

The punchers looked at one another and shifted their feet uneasily. Finally one said, "Boss, we're old-fashioned too. This new business, well, it's sort of hard on a man's feet. If Lee is gonna run cows and—and if he'd have us——"

"I'd never want a better crew," Lee said wholeheartedly.

"Good enough." Jeff nodded. He looked down at the Polacks. "We'll give them pore devils jobs till they've got money enough to get back where they came from. After that there are plenty of men in this country who ain't part of a horse and will be glad to get jobs. Looks to me like things worked out right well."

That was the way it looked to Lee and Jean when, late that afternoon, they sat their horses on the edge of the mesa and looked down on the Basin.

"You wanted it that way, didn't you, Lee?" Jean said. "You wanted what belonged to the West kept for the West—and kept clean and honest."

"Whatever happens in other places, that's the way it will be here." Lee nodded. "We're lucky, Jean. With the Basin and the mesa we've got the new West and the old."

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